

RETHINKING SOCIAL JUSTICE

THEORY AND ACTION IN AN AGE OF TRANSITION



MICHAEL KARLBERG AND DERIK SMITH

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Author Biographies

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Preface

The pursuit of social justice has been a prominent feature of modernity. This pursuit has suffered losses and setbacks, but organized collective action has been slowly bending the arc of history toward justice. This is a basic premise of this book. Bound together by a common, if sometimes hazy, vision and a few shared normative principles, generations of protagonists across the planet have been organizing and sacrificing for greater measures of justice in relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions.

In recent decades, those at the forefront of these movements have drawn on the lessons of diverse predecessors and employed strategies and tactics that have, with varying degrees of success, overcome forces that resist social justice. Many of their efforts have been heroic.

But at the time of this book's publication, many social justice movements across the globe are experiencing severe backlash. Much of this backlash has been engineered by small but powerful segments of society seeking to orient human affairs in ways that consolidate their narrow material interests. This has often been accomplished, in part, by manipulating vulnerable populations through fear appeals and divisive propaganda.

But the backlash is also, in part, a reaction to some of the strategies, tactics, and rhetoric that have dominated the pursuit of social justice in recent decades. Whether warranted or not, many people from diverse backgrounds feel alienated by contemporary social justice movements. Among the alienated are those who live economically precarious lives, whose sense of agency and dignity have been eroding, and who find themselves scorned within the oppressor-versus-oppressed binaries that have been adopted by many who are working for social justice.

The backlash is also partly a reaction to the confrontational mode embraced by many social justice advocates, to the amplification and

exploitation of divisive rhetoric by commercial media framing and social media algorithms, and to the consequent flooding of the public sphere with criticism and attacks, blaming and shaming, calling-out and canceling.

Adding to that, the backlash is also a reaction to the growing crisis of identity that has developed in recent decades. In this crisis, many people have lost sight of those deep sources of meaning and purpose that bring our shared humanity into focus, becoming preoccupied instead by a kaleidoscope of proliferating and competing identity claims that fragment or obscure this humanity.

Surely, it is impossible to fully and precisely describe all the sources of the current backlash, and much of it is rooted in deep-seated prejudices and reflexive othering. Still, it is clear to many advocates and activists that the theories and rhetoric, strategies and tactics, that have dominated social justice movements in recent years need rethinking on a fundamental level. In the midst of the backlash, many of us recognize the need to learn about approaches to social justice that inspire and vivify rather than numb and enervate the human spirit, and that increase human solidarity while decreasing division.

Sensing the urgent need to expand our social imaginary in these ways, we offer this book as a fresh perspective during a tumultuous moment on the long path toward social justice. Our perspective derives, in part, from academic engagement with movements for social change, the ideas that inform them, the ends they seek, and the means they adopt. Our perspective also derives from decades of participatory experience and observations within a faith-based movement oriented toward social justice: the Bahá'í Faith.

The Bahá'í Faith traces its origins to the nineteenth-century writings of Bahá'u'lláh who, due to his revolutionary social and spiritual teachings, suffered for forty years as a prisoner of the Persian and Ottoman empires (from 1852 to his death in 1892). The Bahá'í Faith teaches that all religions come from the same transcendent Essence; that the soul has a two-fold purpose to develop its latent potentialities in order to contribute to the betterment of the world; that science and religion must serve as complementary systems of knowledge and practice whose purpose is to cultivate understanding and apply this to the advancement of civilization; that the primary spiritual challenge facing humanity in

this age is overcoming the many lines of division that have historically divided us, by recognizing our organic unity and interdependence across the planet and learning how to translate this understanding into a new social reality characterized by peace, justice, and shared prosperity; that this will only be possible when women become full partners with men in the construction of social reality; that women and men from every nation, creed, ethnicity, and background have essential contributions to make toward this end; that our patterns of individual and community life, as well as our political and economic systems and institutions, need to be reorganized around these normative principles; that such a reorganization must be informed by the full diversity of human experience across the planet and it must, in turn, accommodate the ongoing expression of individual and cultural diversity; and that we can only construct such a world by learning our way forward because no past or present social order adequately embodies these principles.

These teachings have given rise to an evolving framework for collective action within a steadily expanding movement that encompasses a microcosm of humanity across the planet. Through this movement, Bahá'ís seek to make a distinctive contribution to the betterment of the human condition. But we do not believe we have all the answers to the problems facing humanity. Nor do we believe we can construct a more peaceful, just, and mutually prosperous social order by ourselves. Nor do we seek to impose our views, our standards, our practices, or our institutions on others.

The Bahá'í teachings prohibit proselytizing and prohibit efforts to impose Bahá'í commitments on others through political lobbying or partisan organizing. We believe every soul has the responsibility to investigate reality for itself, that freedom of conscience is a fundamental human right that must be protected, and that striving to align one's life with the Bahá'í teachings is a supremely voluntary choice.

Yet Bahá'ís are confident that growing numbers of people from every background — regardless of their relationship with the Bahá'í movement — are freely orienting toward the same broad horizon of peace, justice, and shared prosperity. This confidence derives partly from the conviction that movement toward this horizon is an inherent aspiration of every soul who is striving to free itself from the baser human instincts we inherited from our long evolutionary struggle to

survive. And this confidence is affirmed by our empirical observations of growing numbers of people taking steps toward this shared horizon. Bahá'ís seek to walk alongside all such people on a path of mutual learning and mutual contribution. And the Bahá'í community is generating an ever-expanding body of experience with this.

These are among the assumptions, commitments, and experiences that inform our engagement with the discourse on social justice and inform the line of reasoning traced in this book.

Introduction

The discourse on social justice revolves around two primary questions: What are the ends of social justice we aspire toward?¹ And what are the most effective means for pursuing those ends? These two questions and the relationship between them are the focus of this book.

On the question of ends, social justice is most commonly understood in terms of whether or not the basic structures of society are just. Today, this question tends to be cast in terms of distributive justice.² Theories of distributive justice tend to focus on whether the basic structures of society support the fair distribution of social goods such as economic resources, education and employment opportunities, health care and other public services, and rights and freedoms. Sometimes they also account for the distribution of status and recognition, influence and power. And some theories of distributive justice even focus on the fair distribution of social burdens such as taxes, military service, and pollution.

These are all significant considerations related to the basic structures of society. But a narrow focus on distributive justice can inadvertently foster a scarcity mindset or trigger a zero-sum bias.³ The pursuit of social

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- 1 The claims made in this introductory chapter, and the conceptualizations offered, are elaborated and substantiated with relevant sources in subsequent chapters.
 - 2 Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); David Miller, "Distributive Justice: What the People Think," *Ethics* 102 (1992); Serena Olsaretti, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
 - 3 Shai Davidai and Martino Ongis, "The Politics of Zero-Sum Thinking: The Relationship between Political Ideology and the Belief that Life is a Zero-Sum Game," *Science Advances* 5, no. 12 (2019); Matilda Hellman, "Justice and Equality as a Zero-Sum Game," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 39, no. 1 (2022); Joanna Różycka-Tran, Paweł Boski, and Bogdan Wojciszke, "Belief in a Zero-Sum Game as a Social Axiom: A 37-Nation Study," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 46, no. 4 (2015); Daniel Meegan, "Zero-Sum Bias: Perceived Competition Despite Unlimited Resources," *Frontiers in Psychology* 1, no. 191 (2010).

justice thus comes to be viewed as a contest for scarce resources and opportunities, rather than a means of mutually working toward greater abundance and shared prosperity. In distributive contests, any gains by one segment of society tend to be perceived as losses for another segment of society. Thus, in recent years, gains by historically marginalized social groups have provoked a powerful backlash by groups seeking to retain or regain past privileges. Indeed, so powerful has this backlash been that, at the time this book was written, the backlash was leaving many social justice movements disoriented and unsure of how to proceed.⁴

An expansive conception of contributive justice offers a way forward.⁵ By contributive justice we are referring to a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent capacities to contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives. Such conditions include distributive justice, but they go well beyond this, as the discussions in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 illustrate. Furthermore, as those chapters illustrate, the concept of contributive justice accords with most people's deepest intuitive understanding of the social dimension of justice, and it constitutes the broad horizon toward which diverse movements for justice all appear, implicitly, to be oriented. The first part of this book lays out our argument regarding how we can conceptualize and orient toward these ends.

On the question of means, the pursuit of social justice is often understood and enacted through contentious politics.⁶ Contentious

4 Jeffrey Alexander, *Frontlash / Backlash* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2025); Tracilyn George, *Woke or Broken: Understanding the Current State of Social Movements* (Toronto: Clydesdale Books, 2025).

5 Though others such as Paul Gomberg, Andrew Sayer, and Michael Sandel have previously theorized *contributive justice*, as we discuss in Chapter 2, we offer a more expansive conception in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Paul Gomberg, "Why Distributive Justice is Impossible but Contributive Justice Would Work," *Science and Society* 80, no. 1 (2016); Paul Gomberg, *How to Make Opportunity Equal: Race and Contributive Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Andrew Sayer, "Contributive Justice and Meaningful Work," *Res Publica* 15 (2009); Andrew Sayer, "Habitus, Work and Contributive Justice," *Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2011); Andrew Sayer, "Capabilities, Contributive Justice and Unequal Divisions of Labour," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 13, no. 4 (2012); Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

6 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Mark Beissinger,

politics is a political science concept that typically refers to collective actions outside the formal mechanisms of state governance. Such actions tend to employ oppositional means for resisting, confronting, disrupting, or overthrowing established social norms and structures, laws and policies, or governing regimes. Some versions of contentious politics accept the legitimacy of violent means such as armed confrontation while others are committed to nonviolent means such as protest and civil disobedience. But all forms of contentious politics rely on forms of othering, however subtle.

Contentious politics is sometimes contrasted with prefigurative politics — or efforts to prefigure the world we aspire toward by working to embody elements of it within the movement itself.⁷ Prefigurative politics can be understood as a collective expression of constructive agency because it represents an effort to actively construct elements of a more just social order that can supplant elements of the oppressive order. Prefigurative politics and constructive agency do not inherently rely on othering, unless they are coupled with contentious politics — which is often the case. However, some movements consciously and deliberately refrain from contentious politics and engage only in prefigurative and constructive forms of collective agency.

Given the normalization of contentious politics in the pursuit of social justice, movements that focus purely on prefigurative and constructive agency are often not recognized as movements at all. When they are, they are sometimes viewed as being too timid and avoiding the “real” work, the “hard” work, of pursuing social justice.

We believe that overlooking or minimizing such movements limits our ability to recognize and imagine radical forms of constructive agency seeking to prefigure a more just world by addressing the root causes of social injustice. Those root causes include the impulse toward othering itself — or the impulse to divide the world into in-

“Contentious Collective Action and the Evolving Nation State,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

7 Carl Boggs, “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control,” *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (1977); Marianne Maeckelbergh, “Doing Is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement,” *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011); Darcy Leach, “Prefigurative Politics,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. David Snow et al., 1–2 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022).

groups and out-groups and treat out-groups in dehumanizing ways. What is needed, in this regard, are long-term movements of sustained collective action capable of addressing the root causes of injustice by entirely supplanting anachronistic social attitudes, norms, practices, and structures. This is radical constructive agency. It is real work, and it is hard work. The second part of this book thus lays out our argument for radical constructive agency as a primary means for pursuing social justice.

The preceding arguments regarding contributive justice and radical constructive agency are offered with attention to the distinct historical context we are all living in. Humanity has entered an age of fundamental transition. As a species, we have developed scientific, technological, and economic powers that have transformed the material conditions of our existence. But we have not yet developed the social and spiritual maturity these new powers and conditions require of us, and our current recklessness imperils our existence. The imperative of this transitional age is to move beyond the violent, unjust, unsustainable, and anachronistic patterns of human existence we grew accustomed to in the past. This cannot be achieved through the universalization of any existing way of life — because no past or present way of life evolved under the conditions we now inhabit. It can only be achieved through the construction of entirely new patterns of global coexistence, informed by the diverse insights, contributions, and learning of all the peoples of the world. In this sense, we are living through an axial age in human affairs, but its outcome is not clearly discernible.⁸

In this context, we advance two central theses in this book. First, we argue that an expansive conception of contributive justice enables us to

8 Karl Jaspers coined the term axial age to refer to the historical period running approximately from the eighth to the third century BCE, in which a number of culturally and geographically distinct civilizations appear to have gone through broadly similar transformative changes at the level of their foundational ideas and values. Though this historical interpretation has been widely debated, and critics argue it oversimplifies human history in various ways, the concept of an axial age remains influential. We will not weigh into debates about the axial nature of the historical period Jaspers examines. Nonetheless, for reasons we articulate later in this book, we believe the concept of an axial age is relevant to understanding a range of globally transformative forces that are accelerating in this late-modern period of history. For his initial work on the axial age, see Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1953).

envision a common horizon — or ultimate ends — toward which diverse movements for social justice all appear to be oriented. This expansive conception of contributive justice entails a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives.

Second, we argue that, in this transitional period of human history, contentious means of pursuing social justice have reached a point of diminishing returns, and we now need to center radical constructive agency as a primary means of bringing about a more just social order in which every individual and group can develop their latent capacity to contribute. By radical constructive agency, we are referring to collective forms of agency that entail actively building new social and political forms capable of supplanting anachronistic ones — new social forms that address the root causes of injustice and oppression. This argument does not imply that contentious means no longer have any value. They may. Our thesis is simply that we need to center radical constructive agency if we want to bring about the conditions of contributive justice alluded to above.

Before proceeding with our argument, we also want to acknowledge that we are, to a large extent, engaging discourses that emerged within, or in response to, Western modernity. Why center such discourses in our analysis? We do so, first, because these are the discourses we have been raised within, the discourses we know best, and the discourses we can authentically speak to. With that said, we understand social justice as a global concern. And we believe every tradition of thought around the world has something to contribute to our understanding of the ends of social justice and the means for pursuing those ends. This book, therefore, constitutes an invitation to further dialogue and inquiry across diverse cultural traditions.

But there is another reason we center Western modernity in our analysis: It has exerted an unparalleled influence on social realities across the planet, for better and for worse. Western modernity gave rise to remarkable advances in human creativity and innovation, in the generation of knowledge, in literacy and education, in health care and life expectancy, in transportation and communication, in cross-cultural exchange, and in the spread of democratic ideals. But these advances

have not accrued evenly within or between diverse populations, and vast numbers of people today live in oppressive conditions. Granted, inequity and oppression are not modern inventions. They are deeply ingrained historical patterns that have taken on new forms in the modern era. And modernity has given rise to a proliferation of sustained struggles to overcome such conditions, motivated by an array of ideas and ideals, including commitments to transform the basic structures of society. Indeed, these commitments have given rise to the distinctly modern discourse on ends and means that this book now seeks to contribute to.

Though we center Western modernity in our analysis for the reasons cited above, we recognize that Western civilization was heavily influenced by the remarkable prior advances of Islamic civilization, which in turn drew on influences from the civilizations of India, sub-Saharan Africa, China, and beyond. Western civilization was also influenced in profound ways by Indigenous cultures of the Americas and beyond.⁹ Western civilization thus did not emerge in a vacuum, and it continues to be influenced by other civilizational centers. Nonetheless, the West did impose a narrow vision of modernity on much of the world. At first, this was accomplished through the force of unprecedented military technologies, reinforced in some cases by the spread of “old world” diseases, at times deliberately, that decimated many “new world” populations. Several centuries of colonization, physical and cultural genocide, and mass enslavement were ushered in by these means — justified by specious notions of racial superiority, often intermixed with a perverted sense of religious mission. In the process, extractive economic arrangements were established across the globe, concentrating previously unimaginable wealth and power in the hands of North Atlantic elites.

Since slavery was outlawed in growing numbers of countries and growing numbers of colonized nations achieved political independence, the global hegemony of Western civilization has been perpetuated through other means. These include the construction of a global economic framework that consolidated the extractive arrangements of the colonial era, has sought to commodify the physical and biological bounties of nature, including genetic codes themselves, and is now

9 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

seeking to commodify the most abstract dimensions of human existence, from human attention to behavioral futures. This Western hegemony has also been achieved through the systematic export of Western values, perspectives, ideas, culture, and knowledge systems through an unprecedented global system of political, commercial, and pseudo-scientific propaganda — buttressed by the globalization of spurious racial concepts, categories, and biases that have permeated hearts and minds as well as social structures in many parts of the world. And finally, this hegemony has been reinforced by the construction of international institutions and legal frameworks that tend to align with Western interests, and by the development of military capabilities able to back up those interests. In short, Western hegemony has been perpetuated in the post-colonial era by the ongoing “coloniality of power.”¹⁰

The consequence of these developments can be seen in extreme disparities of wealth and poverty that undermine human wellbeing across the planet; in a global legacy of racism that continues to divide and oppress; and in environmental disruptions that are destabilizing the earth’s atmosphere and ecosystems, driving countless species to extinction and setting the stage for forced human migrations on a mass scale.

Granted, the concentrations of power and wealth alluded to above have supported remarkable scientific and technological advances and enabled many creative expressions of the human spirit. Modernity, in this sense, has led to many praiseworthy achievements. But at what cost? Though modernity may have brought historically unprecedented expansions of material well-being to many, most of its benefits and opportunities have accrued to only a minority of the global human population. This minority is now living in increasingly precarious conditions of political and economic instability, social alienation, and anomie. Over the course of the twentieth century, these same privileged minorities spawned the most catastrophic explosions of violence in human history in the form of two world wars and subsequently led to the construction of weapons of mass destruction that constitute yet another existential threat to humanity.

10 Walter D. Mignolo, Rita Segato, and Catherine Walsh, eds., *Aníbal Quijano: Foundational Essays on the Coloniality of Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Western modernity has thus been characterized by both progress and barbarism. But marginalized and alienated populations are increasingly unwilling to abide it. Youth who have benefited materially from these arrangements are increasingly driven to despair from it. And the earth cannot sustain it. Thus, the Western model of modernity is now arguably teetering on the brink of civilizational collapse.

Against this backdrop, a proliferation of movements over the last two centuries has given rise to vigorous debates about the ends and means of social change. What should those ends be? What are the most efficacious means of pursuing those ends? Do the ends justify any means? Should the means prefigure the ends? Are there moral dimensions to these questions? Or should movements be guided by purely pragmatic or strategic considerations?

Such questions have been the subject of long-standing debates not only among revolutionaries, reformers, and activists, but also among moral and political philosophers and social theorists. Indeed, for much of the last two centuries, every generation of those interested in social justice and social change has debated these questions. The perennial nature of these seemingly intractable debates suggests the need for fresh perspectives. In this book we offer such a perspective.

In Part I, on the ends of social justice, we argue that social justice can be understood as a universal aspiration that underlies the ferment of modernity. We support this assertion by briefly surveying the proliferation of modern movements for change and examining how they all embody aspirations for social justice. We then examine the inherent human sense of justice that gives rise to such movements, along with instincts such as egoism and othering that can confound the development of a mature sense of justice, as well as social conditions that enable communities to supplant those instincts with more ennobling ones. In turn, we trace the evolution of thought about the ends of social justice in the dominant Western tradition, in subaltern responses to this tradition, and in the emerging discourse on global justice. From this survey, we derive a set of considerations that can orient us toward a common horizon, which we call contributive justice.

Part II explores the means of pursuing these ends. We begin by delineating two conceptual axes around which debates over means tend to revolve. The first is the violence and nonviolence axis. The second is

the contention and construction axis. For each of these axes, we delineate key arguments and considerations at play. We then turn our attention to the prevailing conceptions of power and resistance that tend to inform such debates, and we demonstrate the need to adopt more expansive conceptions of both. These more expansive conceptions bring into focus a central paradox in the pursuit of social justice: the paradox of trying to transcend the oppression inherent in the prevailing culture of contest through the means of political contestation. After examining this paradox, we suggest it can be transcended through radical constructive agency. After delineating the logic of radical constructive agency, we illustrate it with a few examples from different regions of the world. We then examine, in some depth, the Bahá'í experience with radical constructive agency in order to illustrate the global application of these prefigurative means.

Our combined arguments regarding the ends of contributive justice and the means of radical constructive agency are not born from arm-chair philosophizing. Rather, as the Preface to this book indicates, they derive from decades of on-the-ground experience within the global movement of the Bahá'í Faith. This experience has indelibly influenced our moral sensibilities and social commitments. It has informed our conceptual framework. It has offered us distinctive insights into contributive justice and radical constructive agency. And it has given us confidence in humanity's capacity to advance toward these ends through these means.

However, since many of our readers are not drawing on the same body of experience, we justify our argument through a universally accessible line of reasoning that draws on provisional evidence from many sources beyond the Bahá'í community. Though we write from a faith tradition that presumes there is a spiritual dimension to human existence, we cast our argument largely in the secular terms of contemporary discourse. Only in the final chapter of Part II in this book (Chapter 8) do we examine the Bahá'í experience as another piece of provisional evidence in support of our argument.

Before proceeding with our argument, we also want to offer a few comments on the nature of our authorship. In assembling the ideas and arguments of this book, questions of authorship have never been far from our minds. As two individuals writing one text, we have reflected often on the relation between the words on the page and the minds

that put them there. We have come to view ambiguous authorship as an elemental feature of the book. Among other things, it is a gesture that acknowledges the impossibility of adequately tracing the complex origins of ideas. It is also a gesture in support of collaborative knowledge production.

Our collaborative process has compelled us to consider impossible questions about where one human consciousness ends and another begins. But rather than splitting philosophical hairs, as thought-partners, we have been primarily concerned with the shared joy of contributing to a great tradition of discourse about the ends and means of social transformation. Within that tradition, ideas and arguments are rarely regarded as property to be guarded by the intellects who produce them. In its most productive moments, the discourse on social transformation eagerly synthesizes an array of sources.

Consider the diverse thought traditions that informed Martin Luther King Jr.'s political philosophy. King's lifework was a tapestry that wove together usable elements of the Black Church and African American theology, continental European philosophy, American Leftist thought, the Buddhism of Thích Nhất Hạnh, and Mohandas Gandhi's Hindu spiritualism, to name only some of his sources. Perhaps King's great ability to influence discourses of transformation was a function of his great ability to find and bind together the unifying threads within a great diversity of sources. His most influential descendants, like bell hooks, have picked up all those threads and woven in still more, nuancing and lengthening the tapestry of thought that we now add to.

In braiding together the numerous sources and ideas that help us articulate the logic of radical constructive agency, our intellectual method resembles that of King and hooks. Like them, our premise is that social justice is a universal aspiration. This belief prompts us to assemble a wide range of relevant voices in an orchestrated conversation about social transformation. In each of these voices, we are listening for wisdom, insights, and concepts that might inform an approach to social change that meets the requirements of our historical moment.

Some of the individuals that come to voice in our text are well-known and widely revered, like King. But many are not global icons or household names on any continent. Regardless of their status in the world of ideas, we have sought to assess the contributions of individuals

independent of their personal reputations. We have tried to employ a generous interpretive method that prioritizes the advancement of learning about social change, while minimizing the tendency to jettison valid insights because they are associated with partially “flawed” individuals, movements, or traditions.

As admittedly flawed individuals ourselves, we hope that our readers will be most focused on the ideas we seek to braid into the discourse on ends and means. We acknowledge that our experiences reflexively attune us to some insights, while rendering us less attentive to others. And our collaborative approach to authorship ensured that such reflections were elemental aspects of the writing process itself.

Beyond this, to ensure that the manuscript was informed and enriched by a range of perspectives, we shared it widely before publication and revised it based on the many thoughtful responses we received — as reflected in our acknowledgments at the end of the book.

Moreover, we do not see our claims and arguments as the final word on ends and means. Rather, our narrative invites others to make constructive contributions to this discourse and to elaborate on or revise our conclusions. Ideally, those contributions might be informed by efforts to exercise radical constructive agency as we describe it.

Before proceeding, we also want to clarify how we will be using a few key terms throughout this book, so our argument is as accessible as possible. One of these terms is radical. Historically, the Latin word *radicalis* denoted “of or having roots.” This derived from the Latin *radix* or *radicis* meaning “root.” Thus, in the context of our argument, radical implies focusing on the root causes of injustice and oppression. Today, those root causes run very deep to the foundational values, assumptions, and ideas underlying modernity.

Another term is constructive. In popular usage, this term often connotes vague notions such as “positive,” “good,” “useful,” or “leading toward improvement.” But we use the term in its more literal sense, to denote building or constructing something new. More specifically, we are concerned with the construction of entirely new social forms — new patterns of community life, new social structures, and new institutional arrangements.

The final term in this triumvirate is agency. Not all forms of action are conscious or intentional. Agency implies conscious and intentional — or

purposeful — action in pursuit of some outcome. It is an expression of human will that is motivated by the pursuit of some aspiration. Thus, radical constructive agency denotes purposeful action focused on the construction of new social forms that supplant anachronistic social forms with more just ones.

Another term we use in our argument that warrants clarification at the outset is movement. The discourse on social justice often employs the language of “social movements” or “political movements,” and these phrases tend to denote forms of collective action sustained for some period of time in pursuit of specific social or political goals such as securing civil rights for a marginalized segment of a population, advancing gender equality, ending an unjust war, or capturing the state on behalf of some cause. Movements, thus understood, tend to be associated with contentious politics. However, this association can cause us to overlook movements characterized by collective expressions of prefigurative politics and constructive agency in the pursuit of social change. And this can, in turn, limit our imaginations regarding the collective possibility of engaging even more radical expressions of constructive agency.

The language of social and political movements also tends to denote secular movements. This can obscure significant movements for transformative change within religious communities, such as movements of religious reform. It can also obscure the role religious communities play in wider social movements, such as the abolition movement and the civil rights movement. Finally, it can obscure the rise of entirely new religious movements and their transformative effects on entire civilizations. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are striking historical examples of this. And their transformative effects were exerted, at least in part, through radical expressions of constructive agency.

With all of these considerations in mind, we use the term movement in its broadest sense. For the purpose of our argument, a movement is any sustained expression of collective agency — contentious or constructive, secular or religious — motivated by aspirations for social change.

PART I

THE ENDS: CONTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

1. Universal Aspirations

To think coherently about the relation between ends and means in processes of social change, it helps to first clarify the ends. In progressive movements for change today, many interrelated ends can be identified — peace, freedom, equality, dignity, sovereignty, environmental sustainability, and so forth. A compelling argument can be made, however, that the aspiration for social justice underlies or subsumes most if not all of these other ends. Meaningful peace, freedom, equality, dignity, and sovereignty are not possible without social justice. Even environmental movements can be understood in terms of aspirations for social justice. Pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change have disproportionate impacts on marginalized populations, and these impacts are environmental injustices. Similarly, environmental degradation subordinates the wellbeing of future generations to the short-term material interests of current generations, and this is an intergenerational injustice.

On all of these fronts, growing aspirations for social justice can be understood as a fundamental characteristic of modernity. In this regard, modernity can be viewed as a period of accelerating movements for transformative social change, driven by these increasingly universal aspirations. Some of these movements arose, initially, under oppressive conditions inherited from feudal Europe. Many more arose later under oppressive conditions propagated globally through the projection of Western political and economic values, ideas, and practices. Of course, Western civilization cannot be reduced only to its most oppressive aspects. It has also given rise to remarkable expressions of human creativity, the advancement of science, and other accomplishments — including increasingly consequential conceptions of social justice itself. Nor has Western civilization had a monopoly on oppression, past or present. Every civilization and culture has embodied oppressive

elements. And those elements have given rise to many historical struggles for social change. But, for the discussion at hand, we turn our attention to aspirations for social justice that have arisen in the context of, and in reaction to, Western modernity.

Our purpose is to try to discern a common horizon toward which diverse movements for social justice are all implicitly oriented. In other words, what do we mean by social justice? To answer this question, we first examine the ferment for social justice catalyzed by modernity, as well as the human sense of justice that gives rise to it. In Chapter 2 we then trace the way premodern conceptions of justice gave rise to modern conceptions of social justice, the distributive conceptions that came to dominate Western discourse on social justice, subaltern conceptions that complicate the discourse, and global conceptions that further complicate the discourse. This discussion enables us, in Chapter 3, to discern a common horizon that encompasses the aspirations of diverse movements for social justice: contributive justice. And we conclude by discussing the path of social learning that will be needed to advance toward this shared horizon and addressing the concerns of skeptics regarding the ends of social justice we've articulated.

The Ferment of Modernity

When Western modernity is viewed as a whole, one can see that it has set in motion an epoch of unprecedented movements for social justice that continue to proliferate worldwide, partly in response to aspects of Western modernity itself. To see this holistically, it helps to consider the successive waves of movements for social justice that have crashed upon the shores of modernity.

The earliest of these — though not often understood in these terms — are the Protestant Reformation and the scientific revolution. These roughly co-terminus movements, though different in so many ways, shared a common aim of overcoming an oppressive religious hierarchy that monopolized the control of faith and knowledge in feudal Europe while buttressing an equally oppressive political and economic aristocracy. By seeking, respectively, to liberate and democratize the practice of faith and the generation of knowledge, the liberalizing and democratizing impulses of both movements later extended across the

political domain where they arguably contributed to conditions that gave rise to the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, followed by similar revolutions throughout Latin America and beyond.¹

During those same centuries, however, European traders and colonists had been constructing a vast and brutal transatlantic system of racialized slavery. This system enabled the accumulation of vast wealth in an otherwise liberalizing Europe and its colonies by denying the most basic liberties to those forced into the labor that generated this wealth. This denial was based on spurious racial distinctions, conjured through the perversion of religious and scientific reasoning, buttressed by the construction of dehumanizing social norms and legal codes, and reinforced by physical, sexual, and psychological violence. In response, rebellions continually arose among enslaved peoples throughout the colonies.² The most successful and iconic of these was arguably the Haitian revolution, alluded to above. Though rarely acknowledged in conventional history books, it shared with the American and French revolutions their aspirations of freedom from tyranny, it drew upon some of the same intellectual traditions, and it epitomized their noblest ideals. In addition to such rebellions, enslaved peoples engaged in more subtle forms of resistance such as slowing down their work or sabotaging tools and property. They also engaged in *marronage* by escaping slavery in attempts to establish free, generally hidden, subsistence communities — or Maroon communities.

Many of these Maroon communities were integrated with Indigenous populations, who had long been struggling to resist colonial

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- 1 Such arguments have been advanced by a number of scholars over the years. See, for example, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012); Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Robert Merton, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
 - 2 See, for instance, Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, ed. Marcus Rediker (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000); Paul Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

dispossession and oppression throughout the Western hemisphere. Among the more notable of these Indigenous struggles were the Pueblo Revolt, Pontiac's Rebellion, Metacom's War, the Rebellion of Túpac Amaru II, the Totonicapán Uprising, Tecumseh's War, and the Caste War of Yucatán — all of which sought to defend or regain Indigenous autonomy and inspired generations of subsequent Indigenous movements.

Against this complex backdrop, waves of abolitionist movements arose in Europe and its colonies, driven by freed Black people and sympathetic White people. These movements eventually brought about the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade followed by the more gradual abolition of the institution of slavery itself. Of course, legally abolishing slavery did not eliminate racial prejudice, systemic racial discrimination, or racial violence. Movements struggling to overcome the latter have thus been carried forward by every subsequent generation in many parts of the Western world and beyond.

Waves of movements for sexual and gender equality arose alongside these movements for racial equality. Among the most notable early manifestations of this in the Western world were women's suffrage movements, which began achieving their goals in the decades following the abolition of slavery. Since that time, movements against all forms of discrimination and violence based on gender and sexuality have been advancing, at various paces and with varying degrees of success, throughout the Western world and beyond.

During the same general time frame, waves of peasant movements, labor movements, and other economic justice movements also arose — which simultaneously influenced, and were influenced by, the emergence of Marxism as a revolutionary ideology with a utopian vision of shared human prosperity. The cooperative economics movement and cooperative socialism or utopian socialism were early manifestations of such impulses. Communist revolutions were more dramatic and far-reaching manifestations of such impulses, which eventually encompassed a third of the world's population.³ Outside of the Communist orbit, union organizing and the struggle for collective bargaining rights were prominent manifestations of this impulse. Today,

3 Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War 3 Volume Set* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

efforts to advance new forms of labor advocacy and organizing can be discerned in relation to precariat workers within the expanding global gig economy.

In the mid-twentieth century, waves of post-colonial independence movements arose alongside the movements for racial, gender, and economic justice alluded to above. As a growing number of colonized nations won their independence, internal movements began to emerge in many of those nations, seeking to overcome their own culturally inherited forms of oppression, such as the South Asian caste system. Many states also saw the emergence of movements by marginalized ethnic minorities within their borders seeking rights, recognition, and, in some cases, autonomy. In many cases, such movements invoked the increasingly robust discourse on human rights that advanced in the wake of the European holocaust. And, throughout the entire period of Western colonialism, Indigenous populations have struggled for rights, recognition, and autonomy within states that had been consolidated through programs of settler colonialism in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and beyond.

Meanwhile, in the last half of the twentieth century, as the most powerful Western capitalist states began to militarize against the perceived threat of Communist expansion, they set in motion a global arms race that gave rise to a proliferation of military actions around the world, to nuclear arsenals constituting an existential threat to our species, and to increasingly sophisticated forms of political subterfuge that destabilized emerging nations to advance the interests of Western hegemony. Not surprisingly, these developments gave rise to waves of anti-war movements, movements for nuclear disarmament, and related movements for global peace and justice.

That same era saw waves of environmental movements arise, initially in response to intolerable levels of industrial pollution, habitat destruction, and species extinction. Those early environmental movements were later accompanied by environmental justice movements concerned with the disparate racial and class impacts of environmental degradation, along with an environmental sustainability movement concerned with intergenerational justice. Anthropogenic global warming — an existential threat paralleled only by the ongoing prospects of nuclear annihilation — has since become a primary focus

of environmental justice movements.

And in recent decades, the disability justice movement has advanced the struggle for equal opportunities, civil liberties, and full participation in society for people with physical and mental disabilities.⁴ Key goals of this movement have included securing accessibility in public spaces, transportation, and communication; ending discrimination in employment, education, and housing; and promoting independent living and self-determination. The movement has also been attentive to the way disability-based discrimination intersects with other forms of discrimination.

As this last example reminds us, none of the struggles for social justice alluded to above are wholly separate from one another. Forms of oppression based on ethnicity or “race,” gender, class, nationality, disability, and so forth tend to overlap and intersect in complex ways. They are co-constitutive. Though movements for social justice often struggle to recognize or account for these intersectionalities, work by Kimberlé Crenshaw and others has fostered a growing awareness of this challenge,⁵ and many contemporary movements are seeking to become more sensitive to these complexities.

The cursory overview just sketched does not give an exhaustive account of the myriad movements for social change that have arisen in the modern world. But it enables us to see modernity as an age of unprecedented social ferment brought on in part by its internal contradictions and injustices. Though movements for social change are not modern inventions, modernity has catalyzed an unprecedented range of intersecting movements, playing out on an unprecedented scale — all oriented in one way or another toward social justice. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explain, “Social justice is an epoch, and we are living in it.”⁶

4 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); Pamela Block et al., eds., *Occupying Disability: Critical Approaches to Community, Justice, and Decolonizing Disability* (Princeton, NJ: Springer, 2016).

5 Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

6 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Born Under the Rising Sign of Social Justice,” in *Toward What Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

The Underlying Sense of Justice

As the preceding sketch illustrates, the aspiration for social justice is one of the primary motive forces behind all of the movements alluded to above. Countless activists and revolutionaries have been willing to sacrifice their time and energy, their comforts and possessions, and, in many cases, their lives, in struggles for social justice. This deeply felt motivation is rooted in what a growing body of philosophical, psychological, and sociological literature refers to as our *sense of justice* — which appears to be an inherent human characteristic, woven into the nature of our species, long predating modern conceptions of social justice.⁷

Underlying this sense of justice is, in part, a more general sense of fairness.⁸ Evolutionary psychologists point to evidence that a rudimentary sense of fairness exists in some other social species, such as primates and canines.⁹ So, in an evolutionary sense, some rudimentary

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- 7 Refer, for instance, to Dennis L. Krebs, "The Evolution of a Sense of Justice," in *Evolutionary Forensic Psychology: Darwinian Foundations of Crime and Law*, ed. Joshua Duntley and Todd Shackelford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); John Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," *The Philosophical review* 72, no. 3 (1963); Melvin J. Lerner and Sally C. Lerner, eds., *The Justice Motive in Social Behavior: Adapting to Times of Scarcity and Change* (New York: Plenum Press, 1981); Robert Folger, *The Sense of Injustice: Social Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984); Roger D. Masters and Margaret Gruter, eds., *The Sense of Justice: Biological Foundations of Law* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992); Markus Dirk Dubber, *The Sense of Justice: Empathy in Law and Punishment* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Robert Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1990); Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2013).
 - 8 Peter A. Corning, *The Fair Society: The Science of Human Nature and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Stephanie Sloane, Renée Baillargeon, and David Premack, "Do Infants Have a Sense of Fairness?," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 2 (2012).
 - 9 Refer, for instance, to Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes, Revised edition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Jonathan Haidt and Fredrik Bjorklund, "Social Intuitionists Answer Six Questions about Moral Psychology," in *Moral Psychology, Volume 2: The Cognitive Science of Morality*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); Kristen Bonnie and Frans de Waal, "Primate Social Reciprocity and the Origin of Gratitude," in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sarah Brosnan, Hilary Schiff, and Frans de Waal, "Tolerance for

sense of fairness seems to be woven deeply into our nature.

Yet the human sense of fairness is distinct from other social species due to our capacity for language, perspective taking, abstract moral reasoning, the construction of complex social conventions and covenants, and so forth. In other species that exhibit a rudimentary sense of fairness, it is most commonly displayed in an egoistic manner by individuals when they, themselves, are treated unfairly.¹⁰ For instance, capuchin monkeys can be trained to repeatedly complete a simple task to receive a reward of some food they find minimally desirable. But when they observe another capuchin monkey receiving a more desirable food as a reward for the same task, they will start rejecting their initial reward and expressing frustration — presumably because their rudimentary sense of fairness has been violated. In these same studies, however, the monkey receiving the more desirable reward does not offer to share their reward with the monkey that was treated unfairly.¹¹ Of course, many social animals, including capuchin monkeys, do engage in sharing behaviors and other forms of cooperation and mutuality, especially within kin groups or other insider groupings. Moreover, recipients of these pro-social behaviors often respond in ways that indicate instinctive assessments of reciprocity are at play. Sharing can thus engender counter-sharing, and withholding can engender counter-withholding. Assessments of reciprocity thus appear to be another dimension of a rudimentary sense of fairness that is woven deeply into our evolutionarily inherited nature.¹²

Though our human sense of fairness is also frequently expressed in egoistic ways, as well as through simple assessments of reciprocity, it is also commonly expressed when we observe third parties being treated unfairly.¹³ This is often the case when we closely identify with the people

Inequity Increases with Social Closeness in Chimpanzees" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the Royal Society, 2005); Kristen Monroe, Adam Martin, and Priyanka Ghosh, "Politics and an Innate Moral Sense: Scientific Evidence for an Old Theory?," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2009).

10 Krebs, "The Evolution of a Sense of Justice."; Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Random House, 2009).

11 Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*.

12 Jessica Flack and Frans de Waal, "Any Animal Whatever: Darwinian Building Blocks of Morality in Monkeys and Apes," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 1–2 (2000).

13 Krebs, "The Evolution of a Sense of Justice."

being treated unfairly. But our sense of fairness can also be expressed when we learn about complete strangers being treated unfairly. Global justice movements often embody this latter sentiment, as do environmental movements concerned with the wellbeing of generations yet unborn. Our sense of fairness can also be stirred when we learn about the historical ways that people who are no longer alive were treated unfairly. Our sense of fairness can even be stirred through depictions of entirely fictional characters being treated unfairly in entirely fictional settings. All of this is made possible by human capacities to construct mental representations of others, to consider experiences from the perspectives of others, to imagine how others might respond to our own future behaviors or the behavior of third parties, and even to imagine how others might judge our private behaviors if they could observe those behaviors.¹⁴

Thus, the human sense of fairness is distinctly sophisticated. Nonetheless, even the more rudimentary underpinnings of this sense of fairness, which we share with some other social species, can be understood, at least in part, as an evolutionary adaptation that confers fitness. In this regard, the sense of fairness encompasses instinctive assessments of whether any given actions embody the qualities of reciprocity needed to create or sustain cooperation between individuals in social relationships. If an individual is treated unfairly or treats someone else unfairly, this undermines the cooperation upon which the mutual wellbeing of a social group depends. Along with other social animals, we undoubtedly benefit from this basic sense of fairness.

The human sense of justice appears to encompass this underlying sense of fairness. But the former is an even more complex capacity that extends well beyond the latter. This is possible, in part, because human assessments of fairness are not limited to instinctive feelings that translate directly into instinctive behaviors. Human assessments of fairness can also be rationally formulated, publicly articulated, and weighed intersubjectively alongside the assessments of others.

Consider, for instance, how our underlying sense of fairness interacts

14 Robert Selman, *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); E. Tory Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect," *Psychological Review* 94, no. 3 (1987); Justin Aronfreed, *Conduct and Conscience: The Socialization of Internalized Control Over Behavior* (New York: Academic Press, 1968).

with concepts such as free will, moral duty, and just deserts. Historically, many societies have tried to account for the relationship between free will and moral duty partly through the concept of just deserts. The latter concept corresponds to a moral sentiment that appears to be intrinsic to the human sense of fairness.¹⁵ The concept of just deserts is generally understood in terms of giving to each their due based on the degree to which people have freely chosen to exercise their moral duty to contribute to the common good.¹⁶ Thus, on one hand, if someone injures others by consciously violating a community's basic moral norms, the principle of just deserts implies they should be sanctioned or punished in a commensurate manner. On the other hand, if someone makes a great contribution to the well-being of society, the same principle implies they should be rewarded in a commensurate manner. Thus, the principle of just deserts is a means by which societies try to account for, and encourage, exercise of the moral duty to contribute.

The concept of just deserts does not preclude the need to also account for the ways social inequities can enable and constrain the abilities of individuals or entire social groups to contribute to the common good. Reconciling both of these considerations calls for the development of complex forms of moral discernment, entailing the ability to assess the merits of contributions in unprejudiced, nuanced, and context-dependent ways. Such capacities, in turn, enable our individual and collective abilities to assess the moral worth of complex social norms and structures.

Our sense of justice is constituted by complex capacities such as these. For analytical purposes, one could say that our underlying sense of fairness pertains largely to the assessment of interactions between individuals or small groups. Our sense of justice encompasses, but extends beyond, this. It includes, for instance, our collective ability to intersubjectively assess complex social agreements and arrangements, such as criminal codes — which are abstract phenomena with practical implications.¹⁷

15 David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

16 Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6–7.

17 Daniel Sznycer and Carlton Patrick, "The Origins of Criminal Law," *Nature Human Behavior* 4 (2020).

Of course, the distinction between a sense of fairness and a sense of justice is only an analytical distinction. They are inseparable in some ways, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. But for the purpose at hand, this analytical distinction enables us to better examine the relevance of our sense of justice to movements for social change, which arise from collective readings of our social reality. In this regard, our sense of justice enables us to collectively — intersubjectively — assess the moral worth of prevailing laws, social norms, and cultural conventions. Likewise, our sense of justice enables us to collectively assess the legitimacy of authorities and institutions that formulate those laws, enforce those norms, or defend those conventions. Our sense of justice also enables us to collectively assess the integrity of social structures and relationships that have been consolidated over generations from the everyday choices and actions of countless people — choices and actions that aggregate through abstract mechanisms such as markets and elections. Finally, our sense of justice enables us to imagine and construct new social arrangements that are more just. And, of course, all of these collective, intersubjective, assessments are most well-informed when they include the voices and perspectives of those who have directly experienced, or observed, injustice.

In all of these ways, our sense of justice is much more than a basic requisite for fair interpersonal or small group interactions that enable social reciprocity and cooperation. It is a highly sophisticated rational capacity that enables individuals and communities to identify and articulate the need to change specific norms, conventions, laws, structures, relationships, and institutions — and to work for such change. Moreover, it can motivate us to work for social change over long periods of time, often in self-sacrificial ways that may only benefit distant others or future generations.

Our sense of justice can thus be understood as both an intuitive moral aspiration and a complex rational capacity that has affective, cognitive, intersubjective, and motivational dimensions. Stated another way, the sense of justice can be understood as a human faculty that, among other things, enables each generation to collectively imagine and pursue latent social potentialities associated with collective human flourishing. Broadly speaking, one could say these latent potentialities (or what philosophers

call affordances)¹⁸ are the ends our sense of justice orients us toward.

Yet the sense of justice is only a latent capacity within each of us.¹⁹ Though it derives, in part, from innate intuitions of fairness, the sense of justice has to be cultivated through processes of moral and intellectual empowerment.²⁰ In this regard, it can be understood as a moral and intellectual competence.²¹ And its development is intimately bound up with the development of other aspects of moral and intellectual competence, such as the capacity for truth-seeking, impartiality, and moderation.²²

Thus, the development of a mature sense of justice requires, in part, overcoming narrowly self-centered instincts and interpretations in order to expand one's sphere of empathy and common concern. In the absence of such developmental processes, one's underlying sense of fairness becomes confused with emotions such as envy or sentiments such as unwarranted indignation that can arise from an egoistic sense of entitlement. For instance, a child who refuses to help bake a cake, but then cries "it's not fair" when observing a more helpful sibling receive a larger portion of cake, has confused envy and self-centered entitlement with fairness. By extension, a group of capitalists crying "it's not just" when asked to pay progressive tax rates to support the physical and social infrastructure that enables those who labor in their factories to lead productive and meaningful lives, which then enables those capitalists to profit, are confusing an egoistic sense of entitlement — or greed — with a mature sense of justice.

Clues to the development of a mature sense of justice can be found in research regarding two deeply ingrained human susceptibilities that, for the purpose of this discussion, we will refer to as egoism and othering.

18 Manuel Heras-Escribano, *The Philosophy of Affordances* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); James Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boulder, CO: Taylor & Francis, 1979).

19 Rawls, "The Sense of Justice"; Erin Cline, *Confucius, Rawls, and the Sense of Justice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract*.

20 Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2016), see especially pages 101–17.

21 Dubber, *The Sense of Justice: Empathy in Law and Punishment*, see especially pages 91–105; Luc Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Rawls, "The Sense of Justice."

22 Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*, see especially pages 101–17.

Egoism is the deeply rooted human tendency toward self-centered or self-interested attitudes and behaviors. Othering is the deeply rooted human tendency to create in-group and out-group distinctions, or distinctions between “us” and “them.” In contrast, humans are also characterized by a remarkable capacity for altruism, along with the capacity to expand their circle of inclusion. Thus, human nature contains the potential for egoism and altruism, othering and inclusion.²³

All of these potentialities are innate, and empirical research demonstrates they all begin to manifest themselves in rudimentary ways in our first few years of life.²⁴ Of most relevance to the discussion at hand are the ways these innate tendencies interact.²⁵ The construction of in-group

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- 23 Gary Becker, “Altruism, Egoism, and Genetic Fitness: Economics and Sociobiology,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 14, no. 3 (1976); Howard Margolis, *Selfishness, Altruism, and Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape: The Best And Worst Of Human Nature* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006); John Powell and Stephen Menéndian, *Belonging without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); David Berreby, *Us and Them: The Science of Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Henri Tajfel et al., “Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1 (1971); Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).
 - 24 Yair Bar-Haim et al., “Nature and Nurture in Own-Race Face Processing,” *Psychological Science* 17, no. 2 (2006); Andrew Scott Baron and Yarrow Dunham, “Representing ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Building Blocks of Intergroup Cognition,” *Journal of Cognition and Development* 16, no. 5 (2015); Kristen A. Dunfield and Valerie Kuhlmeier, “Intention-Mediated Selective Helping in Infancy,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 4 (2010); Karen Wynn et al., “Not Noble Savages After All: Limits to Early Altruism,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 27, no. 1 (2018); Alessandra Geraci and Luca Surian, “The Developmental Roots of Fairness: Infants’ Reactions to Equal and Unequal Distributions of Resources,” *Developmental Science* 14 (2011); Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*; J. Kiley Hamlin et al., “Not Like Me = Bad: Infants Prefer Those Who Harm Dissimilar Others,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 4 (2013); Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Neha Mahajan and Karen Wynn, “Origins of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’: Prelinguistic Infants Prefer Similar Others,” *Cognition* 124, no. 2 (2012).
 - 25 Wynn et al., “Not Noble Savages After All: Limits to Early Altruism”; Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*; Bailey House et al., “Ontogeny of Prosocial Behavior Across Diverse Societies,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110 (2013); Katherine McAuliffe et al., “The Developmental Foundations of Human Fairness,” *Nature Human Behavior* 1 (2017); Philippe Rochat et al., “Fairness in Distributive Justice by 3- and 5-Year-Olds Across Seven Cultures,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2009); Mark Sheskin et al., “Life-History Theory Explains Childhood Moral Development,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 18 (2014).

and out-group distinctions tends to give rise to cooperation, trust, and empathy within in-groups. Yet it tends to breed competition, suspicion, and antipathy in relation to out-groups. The first half of this pattern has been termed *selective altruism* or *parochial altruism*.²⁶ And the entire pattern begins to be expressed from very young ages in pre-socialized ways — with implications for one's developing sense of justice.²⁷

These innate tendencies have profound implications for the development of a mature sense of justice in the increasingly multicultural societies many people across the planet now live in. As David Miller explains,

The real challenge of multiculturalism, then, is not that it makes agreement about principles of social justice impossible to achieve, but that it makes it harder for people to see themselves as members of an inclusive community across which these principles are to be implemented. We do have evidence about the relationship between identification and justice: the more closely A identifies with B, the more willing A will be to practice justice toward B, in whatever form is appropriate to their relationship. Wherever distinct cultural groups form within a political community, they tend to exaggerate both the degree of cultural homogeneity within the group and the degree of difference with non-members. This will lead to a contraction of the ethical universe within which conceptions of social justice are applied, unless it is counteracted by a strong overarching identity that pulls the various groups together.²⁸

The underlying human susceptibilities toward egoism and othering that can distort our sense of justice may have served some function in the long evolutionary struggle to survive. In diverse contemporary societies,

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- 26 Richard Epstein, "Altruism: Universal and Selective," *Social Service Review* September (1993); Hannes Rusch, Robert Böhm, and Benedikt Herrmann, "Parochial Altruism: Pitfalls and Prospects," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016); Jim Everett et al., "Economic Games and Social Neuroscience Methods Can Help Elucidate the Psychology of Parochial Altruism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015); Angela Dorrough et al., "The Development of Ingroup Favoritism in Repeated Social Dilemmas," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015); M. Paula Cacault et al., *Do We Harm Others Even If We Don't Need To?*, vol. 6 (2015).
 - 27 Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*; Wynn et al., "Not Noble Savages After All: Limits to Early Altruism."
 - 28 Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 263. In support of this conclusion, see also Yuen Huo et al., "Superordinate Identification, Subgroup Identification, and Justice Concerns: Is Separatism The Problem; Is Assimilation The Answer?," *Psychological Science* 7, no. 1 (1996); Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*; Tom Tyler et al., *Social Justice In A Diverse Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

however, these same susceptibilities have become primary impediments to the development of a mature sense of justice that applies equally to all, and this includes a concern about how just the basic structure of society is.

Such impediments can only be overcome, it seems, through forms of education and socialization that foster our latent capacities for altruism and inclusivity. Indeed, as a social species, our sense of justice and its relationship to other instincts and capacities is profoundly shaped by our social environment. It is shaped in our earliest formative years by our family environments. It is shaped by the broader systems of meaning and representation that surround us. It is shaped by the social practices and institutional arrangements we observe, imitate, participate in, and are incentivized by. In other words, it is shaped by every aspect of our *habitus*.²⁹

These are themes we will return to later in this book. In the meantime, it should also be noted that some people understand the sense of justice in spiritual terms or as rational intuitions about transcendent truths governing human existence.³⁰ From this perspective, the principle of justice can be understood as an ontological truth about human reality, analogous to the way the law of gravity appears to be an ontological truth about physical reality. When the principle of justice is violated, human suffering occurs, even if those consequences are not immediately manifest or are not apparent to all. Nonetheless, those consequences are just as predictable as the harm that results from ignoring gravity. One does not need a PhD in physics to grasp the latter. One does not need a PhD in moral philosophy to grasp the former.

Not surprisingly, this spiritual conception of justice has deep roots in social movement thought. For instance, it directly informed Mohandas Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*.³¹ *Satyagraha* — often translated as

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power," in *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

30 Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*; William Hatcher, *Love, Power, and Justice: The Dynamics of Authentic Morality* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002).

31 Mohandas Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance: Satyagraha* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001); Mohandas Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover

“truth force” — denotes holding firmly to spiritual truths such as justice in one’s public actions and relying on the moral force of those truths to stir other souls to arise in support of movements for social change. A similar conception informed the thought and action of Martin Luther King Jr. and many of his peers,³² and has informed the thinking of many other social justice activists.³³

It should also be noted that spiritual perspectives on justice are not inconsistent with the perspective on justice offered by evolutionary biology. Rather, the emergence of the human soul (if we assume its existence) can rationally be understood as a process made possible through the interaction of evolutionary biology and a transcendent spiritual reality. Of course, belief in the existence, or non-existence, of a transcendent spiritual reality are articles of faith, examination of which lies beyond the scope of the discussion at hand. Suffice it to say that the conception of justice as a faculty of the human soul is a rational premise with implications for social action.³⁴

In sum, whether one adopts a materialist perspective grounded purely in evolutionary biology or a perspective that sees coherence between evolutionary biology and spiritual dimensions of existence, one can recognize that the sense of justice is a latent human competence in need of development. Though justice is a rational human faculty, it is not a faculty that springs forth automatically. Rather, it is a human potential that must be developed. Its development entails learning to regulate purely self-interested instincts while developing powers of empathy and perspective taking, moral discernment and moral reasoning, intersubjective truth-seeking, and so forth. These developments are often informed by the experience, or direct observation, of injustice, leading to a corresponding aspiration for justice. And they are also

Publications, 1983 [1948]).

32 James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

33 Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

34 These implications are explored in depth in Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá’í Studies, 2020).

deeply shaped by our social environments.

To the extent this latent sense of justice develops in a healthy and mature manner, it enables us to collectively assess the moral worth of prevailing social arrangements. These aspirations and assessments, when they are collectively shared, give rise to movements for social justice. The social ferment we see across the globe today can be traced to these aspirations and assessments — which are being stirred by a myriad of social injustices endemic to the modern social order.

With that said, a movement that is reacting only to injustice can only go so far. Shared assessments regarding conditions of social injustice and shared aspirations to organize for social justice must ultimately be translated into a shared vision of a more just social order if they are to lead to lasting social change. Articulating such a vision is no simple matter. It is relatively easy to point out the myriad social conditions today that violate our sense of justice. Important as this is, it only gives voice to a negative conception of social justice — an apophatic conception — or a conception of what social justice is not.³⁵ It is much harder to articulate a positive conception of social justice — or a conception of what social justice is.

Taking the aspiration for social justice seriously requires us to articulate a reasonably coherent, widely acceptable, positive understanding of the ends we seek — at least at the level of principle. Just as importantly, if we cannot arrive at some shared understanding of the broad ends we seek across diverse movements for social justice, such movements will remain both reactive and fragmented and thus unable to collectively achieve solidarity, coherence, and meaningful progress. Is there a broadly shared, positive vision of social justice that can inform and align diverse movements for social change? How might such a vision accommodate diverse cultural expressions? Culturally homogenizing visions will merely replicate neo-colonial impulses. And yet, without some broadly shared vision, movements for social justice will remain fragmented and reactive, focused largely on dismantling particular structures of oppression rather than constructing just alternatives within a coherent

³⁵ This problem has been noted by many observers, going back to authors such as the political sociologist Barrington Moore, Jr. See *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery and Upon Certain Proposals to Eliminate Them* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972); *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (New York: Routledge, 1978).

global “movement of movements.”³⁶

As we discuss in the second half of this book, dismantling particular structures of oppression is not enough. If more just social forms are not simultaneously constructed, new forms of oppression fill the vacuum. Consider, for instance, the Iranian revolution that culminated in 1979, in which a diverse coalition of secular and religious groups successfully overthrew an oppressive Shah. But in doing so, they created a vacuum that was quickly filled by the rise of an even more oppressive regime — the Islamic Republic of Iran — which capitalized on its organizational advantages and shrewd political maneuvering.³⁷

Furthermore, national struggles for social justice, important as they are, are not enough. Many contemporary injustices are driven by global forces. Those global forces can only be addressed if movements for social justice achieve some degree of global coherence.

Toward this end, in Chapter 2 we trace the way premodern conceptions of justice gave rise to modern conceptions of social justice, the distributive conceptions that came to dominate Western discourse on social justice, subaltern conceptions that complicate the discourse, and global conceptions that further complicate the discourse. Of course, no survey of this kind can be comprehensive. Nor can such a survey be without bias in its selection and interpretation of relevant traditions of thought. Our survey should thus be read as an invitation for others to contribute their perspectives and interpretations to this conversation.

36 Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004).

37 Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Scott Anderson, *King of Kings: The Iranian Revolution: A Story of Hubris, Delusion and Catastrophic Miscalculation* (New York: Doubleday, 2025).

2. The Discourse on Social Justice

Though premodern conceptions of justice trace back through the millennia in many cultural traditions, the modern discourse on social justice arguably arose due to a historical sequence of conceptual developments enumerated below. Of course, implicit aspirations for something akin to social justice can probably be traced back to the earliest hierarchal forms of social organization. But such aspirations would have been difficult to articulate and difficult to foster collective discourse around prior to the establishment of a set of requisite ideas about human nature and social reality.

Premodern Roots

Robert Solomon's *A Passion for Justice* offers a fruitful starting point for exploring the premodern antecedents of modern conceptions of social justice. Solomon demonstrates that some of the earliest recorded references to justice in the Western world were bound up with passions such as vengeance. Pointing to the Homeric tradition of ancient Greece, he explains that

in the brutal world of *The Iliad*, justice meant little other than revenge, and the concept of justice could even be coupled with wholesale genocide, as when Agamemnon reproaches his brother Menelaus for taking a hostage and urges him, "No, let us not leave even one of them alive, down to the babies in their mothers' wombs," and Homer, commenting, tells us that "he [Agamemnon] turned his brother's heart, for he urged justice." Justice, in this sense, isn't even getting even, for one is instructed to punish the offender far more savagely than one was offended. Justice, in this sense, is simply self-assertion, the unqualified insistence that one's honor and integrity must be defended, and that any offender deserves the worst. It is the justice of the warrior, the victor, the justice of the strong...

the idea that justice should be tempered with compassion and mercy was still a millennium away, and vengeance was a legitimate passion.¹

Against this backdrop, Solomon argues that principles of justice articulated in the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible) constitute a civilizing revision of the Homeric concept of justice. The ancient Hebrew principle of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” may sound harsh by contemporary standards. But this was a reformulation of justice that demanded balance and restraint. In contrast to the Homeric tradition, Hebrew law prescribed that “one should *only* extract an eye for an eye, rather than kill the offender and his entire family.”²

The broader thrust of Solomon’s argument is that early conceptions of justice — at least in Homeric Greece — were at least partly shaped by base human passions. In this regard, justice was an immediate, deeply personal, and unrefined sentiment, which arose in the context of relations between individuals, families, clans, tribes, or city-states. Only later did more abstract conceptions of justice emerge, concerned with notions of how “the good society” should be organized.

In *A Brief History of Justice*, David Johnston traces the evolution of these more abstract conceptions of justice from ancient Babylonia through the Western tradition to the present.³ Johnston points out that, while Homer’s *Iliad* emerged in a decentralized society of competing warrior clans, Babylonia was a complex organized state with a centralized apparatus of power. In that context, the earliest formalized conceptions of justice, such as those found in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi and in ancient Hebrew law, tended to focus on the reciprocal nature of obligations that arise from relationships between people. The principle of reciprocity remains, at least implicitly, at the center of many conceptions of justice today. Reciprocal obligations have typically been understood along the lines of Marcus Tullius Cicero’s statement “justice renders to everyone his due” and Saint Augustine’s restatement “justice is that virtue which gives to each his due.”⁴ A similar notion echoes in the idiomatic expression “just deserts” discussed in Chapter 1. All of these

1 Robert Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1990), 9.

2 Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract*, 9.

3 David Johnston, *A Brief History of Justice* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

4 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*; St. Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei*, 19.21.

phrases denote the rewards or punishments one deserves based on the extent to which one has respected implicit or explicit social obligations. Fleischacker explains this basic conception of justice as follows:

What is due to our neighbors is that we not kill, beat, or otherwise physically harm them and that we not take things that belong to them. What is due to people who violate these minimal standards of justice — to criminals—is a punishment fitting to their crimes. What is due to people with whom we have a contractual relationship is that we deliver on our promises or make good for our failure to do so. And what is due to people who make great contributions to society is some sort of reward — something that “fits” their achievement.⁵

The first recorded Western effort to articulate a theory of justice can be found in Plato’s *Republic*. One of Plato’s primary concerns in formulating his theory was to refute the relativistic and self-interested conceptions of justice that were being propagated by the Sophists. In brief, Plato argues that justice is the essential virtue or function of the human soul, just as the essential virtue or function of eyes is seeing and the virtue or function of the ears is hearing. Meanwhile, the essential craft of the ruler is tending to the interests of those being ruled, just as the doctor tends to the interests of his patients. To do this, the ruler must develop in themselves the essential virtue of justice, which is in turn an essential condition for the unity and harmony of the polis. Thus, in Plato’s conception, justice is not simply another virtue. It is *the* essential spiritual virtue, and *the* essential foundation of an integrated and harmonious society.

Plato also advanced the more problematic argument that a just and harmonious society is one in which every social class engages in the work intended by their essential nature and does not interfere with the functioning of other social classes. Plato’s conception of justice is thus embedded in a hierarchical or caste-based worldview that was typical of his time.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle attempts to develop a more robust theory of justice. His theory posits two forms of justice: distributive and corrective. Distributive justice, which is largely a legislative function, entails the state’s effort to ensure a fair distribution of benefits and

⁵ Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6–7.

burdens among members of a political community. Corrective justice, which is largely a function of the courts, entails restoring distributive fairness when it is violated through interpersonal actions. In his *Politics*, Aristotle (like Plato) elaborates a hierarchical understanding of justice by assuming some members of any political community have greater contributive merit than others, which must be factored into distributive justice. According to this logic, benefits and burdens should only be shared equally among those of equal merit. Those of lesser merit (among whom Aristotle accounts women, slaves, and non-Greeks), thus receive fewer benefits and greater burdens.

The theories of justice articulated by Plato and Aristotle illustrate a wider tendency in ancient societies characterized by strong social hierarchies. Among members of the same social strata, social obligations were generally understood in equal terms. Social obligations also existed across different social strata, but those obligations were unequal. For instance, when equivalent crimes were committed among members of the same social caste, justice warranted equal punishments. But when equivalent crimes were committed across caste lines, justice warranted harsher punishments for members of lower castes. Such hierarchical conceptions of justice were characterized by what Johnston calls “balanced reciprocity” within the same caste and “imbalanced reciprocity” across caste lines.⁶ Imbalanced reciprocity was justified by the assumption that different people were unequal in their innate capacities to contribute and thereby in their innate worth to society. Social obligations were thus understood in proportion to caste-based categorizations of social worth.

A substantive challenge to hierarchical notions of justice in the ancient Western world came with the establishment and Western spread of Christianity, with its call to recognize the inherent dignity and equal moral worth of every soul, and corresponding efforts to construct new patterns of community life on this premise. Such thinking was then reinforced by the spread of Islamic thought, which had a profound influence on subsequent Western thought. Indeed, it was Islamic philosophy that reintroduced ancient Greek and Roman philosophy to the West after the Middle Ages — along with the introduction of many

6 Johnston, *A Brief History of Justice*.

distinctive Islamic contributions.⁷

The relatively egalitarian views introduced by Christianity and extended by Islam were not held by the ancient Greeks or Romans, as demonstrated by the latter's casual and pervasive cruelty, tolerance of slavery, and legal codes.⁸ Of course, hierarchal conceptions of justice continued to surface in Christian and Islamic civilizations. Such conceptions characterized the medieval feudal system of Europe and their counterparts farther east. And they clearly characterized the slave-based racial caste system that was constructed in the Americas, rationalized through perverse interpretations of scripture motivated by crass self-interests. Likewise, the caste systems of South Asia and other highly stratified traditional societies also carried hierarchal conceptions of justice into the modern era, and these combined legacies continue to shape the world in significant ways. However, many contemporary movements for social justice can be understood, in part, as reactions

7 One can argue that the modern Western discourse on social justice was profoundly shaped by premodern Islamic influences. Islamic civilization, at its height, had taken remarkable steps toward a more just social order. Under the Abbasid caliphate, from the eighth century through the thirteenth century, Islamic civilization fostered religious tolerance and protection of minorities; good governance, the rule of law, the maintenance of peace, and the extension of trade across a vast region; the establishment of schools, hospitals, soup kitchens, orphanages, hostels, and other public goods and services, made possible in part by the Islamic emphasis on almsgiving and charity, all of which contributed to the societal redistribution of resources and care; and the flourishing of intellectual activity that made lasting global contributions to the advancement of the arts and sciences. Indeed, such contributions played a significant role in the subsequent emergence of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. However, tracing the ways premodern Islamic civilization influenced the emergence of the modern discourse on social justice is beyond the scope of this book. For discussions of these themes, see Hossein Askari and Abbas Mirakhor, *Conceptions of Justice from Islam to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam, Revised Edition*, trans. John Hardie and Hamid Algar (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2000 [1949]); Amina Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class, and Gender," *Journal of Law and Religion* 12 (1995–6); Farid Esack, "In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: One World, 2003); Anitta Kynsilehto, ed., *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* (Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2008); Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990); Shadaab Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

8 Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

against hierarchical systems of imbalanced reciprocity — or as struggles for more egalitarian systems based on recognition of the equal moral worth of every person and group.

Another salient feature of the evolution of thought about justice is that in the ancient world justice was commonly understood as a social obligation that only applied among members of a given society or polis. It was not an obligation that extended to outsiders.⁹ The Stoics introduced an early conception of justice that applied, in theory, beyond one's own polis and, as alluded to above, Christianity later offered a spiritual justification for a similarly universal conception. Yet provincial conceptions of justice were the norm in the ancient Western world and beyond, and they continue to influence the modern world.

For instance, the Westphalian system of national sovereignty that still largely defines the current global order has, until relatively recently, been indifferent to the principle of universal justice. At least until the second World War, modern states were presumed to care primarily, if not exclusively, for the interests of their own citizens. Even today, despite the emergence of international human rights frameworks and other global humanitarian conventions, social obligations to the citizens of other states remains a contested principle that many modern states — whether democratic or authoritarian — tend to ignore. Provincial conceptions of justice thus continue to shape the modern world. However, important contemporary movements for social justice can be understood, in part, as struggles informed by commitments to universal justice in an age of ever-increasing global interdependence, mutual awareness, and mutual identification.

Another salient feature of the evolution of thought about justice is that in the ancient world the social order, including its hierarchical arrangement, was commonly viewed as an immutable expression of the natural order of things.¹⁰ However, Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke established an understanding that the social order is constructed rather than given, that all humans are in some sense equal, and that this equality carries with it inherent natural rights that should be respected in the way society is constructed. These views — radical by historical standards — suggested that humans could

9 Johnston, *A Brief History of Justice*.

10 Johnston, *A Brief History of Justice*.

reconstruct the entire social order in previously unimagined ways, which had profound implications for conceptions of justice. Justice was no longer limited to relational obligations among people within a fixed social order. Justice was now relevant to the constitution of the social order itself, and the later emergence of the concept of social justice owes much to this transformative period in human thought.

A closely related feature of the evolution of thought about justice came from social contract thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. As Kant argues, the justice of particular laws or social arrangements can be assessed by the criterion of whether or not participants in an implied social contract would have knowingly agreed to it. This Kantian notion of an implicit “original contract” later informed John Rawls’s conception of the “original position” from which hypothetical citizens could design a just social order. These ideas have become central to many of today’s most influential theories of social justice, to which we will return. In the meantime, suffice it to say that many contemporary movements for social justice can be understood, in part, as expressions of those who either want to see existing social contracts truly honored or who reject the terms of inherited social contracts and seek to renegotiate them.

Another salient feature of the evolution of thought about justice came from moral philosophers such as Adam Smith who, against the troubling backdrop of the industrial revolution’s endemic poverty and exploitation, attempted to envision economic arrangements that could better harness the division of labor in ways that yielded maximal prosperity for all. The utilitarian views about division of labor these moral philosophers articulated, when combined with the Enlightenment principle of essential human equality, further complicated hierarchical notions of reciprocal obligation.¹¹ Those hierarchical notions, as mentioned earlier, were based on assumptions regarding the proportional merit of individuals from different social castes, due to their presumed contribution to the overall social good. Yet, in market systems characterized by economic interdependence, the contribution of any given person or group is inextricably related to, and dependent on, the contributions of others. Moreover, public investments

11 Johnston, *A Brief History of Justice*.

in shared infrastructure and other public goods, such as education, further complicate the question of proportional contribution to the overall social good — as do processes such as the inheritance of wealth that is not earned by the inheritor, proportional tax rates, and so forth. In this regard, many contemporary movements for social justice can be understood, in part, as reactions against overly simplistic, ahistorical, exploitative notions regarding the proportional contribution of different individuals and groups to the greater social good.

Yet another salient feature of the evolution of thought about justice comes from social thinkers such as Karl Marx, who argues that dominant conceptions of justice, fairness, and proportional desert derive from the bourgeois ideology that justifies capitalism, and have been used to rationalize social inequality. They should be replaced, he argues, by the principle of need. Hence his widely cited dictum “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”¹²

Following Marx, the tension between proportional deserts and differential needs has framed many debates about social justice. This tension clearly remains unresolved. Nonetheless, it is widely understood today that what is needed for people to develop their latent abilities to contribute to society can vary due to historical, environmental, and biological conditions that are sometimes beyond their control.

Modern Conceptions

All of the conceptual developments traced above prepared the way for the modern Western discourse on social justice. However, the earliest recorded uses of the phrase “social justice” were coincident to these developments. For instance, Edward Gibbon used the term in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but in a manner that merely denoted the concept of criminal justice, which he was distinguishing from concepts such as divine justice. Gibbon’s use of the term did not even encompass the Aristotelian concept of distributive justice. Throughout the eighteenth century, the term social justice was occasionally used by others in ways similar to Gibbon.¹³ That same

12 Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), Part I, #3.

13 Friedrich Hayek argues this point in *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), ch. 9, n. 2.

century did see the reemergence of an implicit concern with distributive justice, in the form of social and intellectual movements to reduce or eliminate poverty, though the term social justice was not yet explicitly associated with such movements.¹⁴

The earliest explicit use of the term social justice in something akin to its modern meaning is commonly attributed to a pair of nineteenth-century Italian Catholic scholars, Antonio Rosmini¹⁵ and Luigi Taparelli.¹⁶ Both began using the term *giustizia sociale* around the 1840s, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Jacobin reign of terror, and Napoleonic despotism — and against the backdrop of growing class conflict across Europe. In this context, Rosmini and Taparelli employed the term as part of their respective efforts to construct political philosophies that could reconcile (i) the inherent and equal dignity of all people, on a moral or spiritual level, with (ii) the proportional rewards due to particular persons based on their distinctive abilities, virtues, and contributions to the common good. They conceptualized social justice as an ideal social condition in which the two preceding principles were reconciled in a way that promoted social harmony and maximized wellbeing. To Rosmini and Taparelli, this required that the dignity of every person be honored, but within hierarchical social arrangements that simultaneously honored the proportional merit of distinct persons. In other words, they asserted that the condition of social justice would be achieved when the abstract principle of human equality was harmonized with the practical inevitability of social hierarchies.

14 See Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (London: Profile, 2004); Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*.

15 Rosmini first used the term in 1837 in his *Philosophy of Politics, Volume 2: Society and Its Purpose*, trans. Denis Cleary and Terence Watson (Durham, UK: Rosmini House, 1994), chapter 15, paragraphs 280–82. His fullest elaboration of the term was in his 1848 treatise *The Constitution under Social Justice*, trans. Alberto Mingardi (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007). For an analysis of Rosmini's conception of social justice, see Robert P. Kraynak, "The Origins of 'Social Justice' in the Natural Law Philosophy of Antonio Rosmini," *The Review of Politics* 80 (2018).

16 Luigi Taparelli employed the term in his 1940 work "Saggio Teoretico Di Dritto Naturale Appoggiato Sul Fatto" i.e., "A Theoretical Essay on Natural Right from an Historical Standpoint" (Miami, FL: HardPress Publishing, 2016). For an analysis of Taparelli's conception of social justice, see Thomas P. Burke, "The Origins of Social Justice: Taparelli d'Azeglio," *Modern Age* 52, no. 2 (2010); Thomas Behr, "Luigi Taparelli and Social Justice: Rediscovering the Origins of a 'Hollowed' Concept," *Social Justice in Context*, no. 1 (2005); Michael Novak and Paul Adams, *Social Justice Isn't What You Think It Is* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015), 90–91.

This effort to foreground social hierarchy within a conception of social justice may appear inconsistent with how the term social justice is commonly used today. Contemporary movements for social justice often seek to deconstruct social hierarchies based on ethnicity or “race,” gender, class, caste, and so forth. Some anarchist movements even seek to eliminate hierarchy altogether on the assumption it is an inherently oppressive organizing principle for human affairs. In contrast, Rosmini and Taparelli’s conception of social justice echoes premodern conceptions premised on the inevitability of social hierarchy. What was new in Rosmini and Taparelli’s conception was an effort to harmonize social hierarchy with the abstract notion of human equality that had been articulated and widely embraced in the European Enlightenment. Most contemporary social justice movements still grapple, to some degree, with efforts to reconcile the equal moral worth of every person with proportional reward for the merits of each person’s contributions to the greater good. In this regard, many people agree on the need to reduce the extremes of wealth and poverty that exist both within and among modern nation states. But the extent to which economic inequalities should be moderated, the extent to which people should be rewarded proportionately for their relative contributions to the common good, and the extent to which functional hierarchies of various kinds are necessary for social organization, are still contested even within movements for distributive justice.

Rosmini and Taparelli’s use of the phrase “social justice” foreshadowed the discourse that would soon emerge. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the phrase was employed occasionally in essays on political economy, social ethics, and related themes. For instance, John Stuart Mill invoked the phrases “social justice” and “distributive justice” somewhat interchangeably, in his critiques of the prevailing capitalist-industrial order.¹⁷ Other influential writers of that era such as Henry Sidgwick and Leslie Stephen also used the phrase, denoting related concerns with distributive justice.¹⁸ But widespread use of the phrase did not begin until the twentieth century, as we see in Figure 1.

17 For an insightful examination of the conception of social justice that runs through Mill’s work see Barry Clark and John Elliott, “John Stuart Mill’s Theory of Justice,” *Review of Social Economy* 59, no. 4 (2001); Piers Norris Turner, “Mill’s Evolutionary Theory of Justice: Reflections on Persky,” *Utilitas* (2019).

18 See, for instance, Henry Sidgwick, *Principles of Political Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1883); Leslie Stephen, *Social Rights and Duties*, Vol. I (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1896).

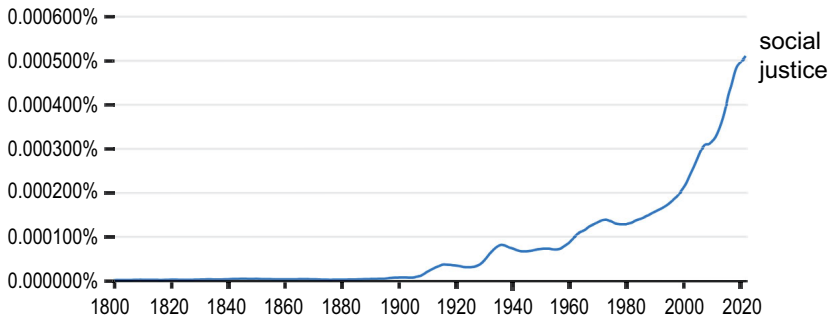


Fig. 1 Use of the phrase “social justice” in English print.¹⁹ Created by the authors (2026)

The first book to carry the title *Social Justice* was written in 1900 by the political scientist Westel Willoughby, followed not long after by *Essays in Social Justice* by the economist Thomas Nixon Carver, *The Elements of Social Justice* by the sociologist Leonard Hobhouse, and texts by other scholars who were beginning to systematically explore the concept and its applications to modern society.²⁰ These authors were writing in the context of rising labor movements, the spread of socialism, and other movements of the day. The first of these authors, Willoughby, argues that the Enlightenment had ushered in an era in which growing numbers of people are increasingly and legitimately subjecting all manner of social and economic conditions to the tests of fairness and justice. In this context, Willoughby, like many Western liberal thinkers of the day, saw a need to address the worst excesses of the prevailing social order according to reasonable principles of distributive justice. One of his motivations for this was to avert movements toward socialism.

Willoughby, Hobhouse, and many others writing about social justice at that time were writing within the functionalist framework that characterized much late nineteenth century and early twentieth century social thought. Functionalism adopts an organic conception

19 Data from Google Books Ngram Viewer, retrieved 8 October 2023. The Ngram Viewer's corpus is made up of all the scanned books available in Google Books. The X axis shows the year in which works from the corpus were published, and the Y axis shows the frequency with which the ngrams appear throughout the corpus.

20 Westel Willoughby, *Social Justice* (New York: Macmillan, 1900); Thomas Nixon Carver, *Essays in Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1915); Leonard Hobhouse, *The Elements of Social Justice* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1922).

of society, and it has significant implications for how social justice is conceived. Within this framework, as Miller explains, “Society is viewed as an organism in which the flourishing of each element requires the cooperation of all others, and the aim of social justice is to specify the institutional arrangements that will allow each person to contribute fully to social well-being.”²¹ This organic conception of social justice became quite influential in early twentieth-century Western thought, echoed even in the teachings of the Catholic church. As Pope Pius XI wrote in his 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*,

Now it is of the very essence of social justice to demand from each individual all that is necessary for the common good. But just as in the living organism it is impossible to provide for the good of the whole unless each single part and each individual member is given what is needed for the exercise of its proper function, so it is impossible to care for the social organism and the good of society as a unit unless each single part and each individual member — that is to say each individual man in the dignity of his human personality — is supplied with all that is necessary for the exercise of his social functions. If social justice be satisfied, the result will be an intense activity in economic life as a whole, pursued in tranquility and order. This activity will be proof of the health of the social body, just as the health of the human body is recognized in the undisturbed regularity and perfect efficiency of the whole organism.²²

The organic conceptions of society prevailing in that era were later criticized because many functionalist writers naïvely assumed that the basic structures of Western liberal societies — including capitalism — were relatively just. The aim of functionalist social scientists was to clarify the sources of social cohesion and social stability that could ensure the maintenance of already-existing social systems, sometimes supported by modest reforms. As generations of Marxist critics and others have since pointed out, those naïve views had been articulated from positions of privilege that obscured the deeply exploitative economic relationships, systemic racism, gender discrimination, and other injustices that have always plagued Western liberal societies.

Though the vision of many functionalist thinkers has clearly been

21 David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

22 Pope Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris on Atheistic Communism* (West Monroe, LA: St Athanasius Press, 2016 [1937]), paragraph 52.

limited in this way, others have employed organic conceptions of society in a more critically informed manner. Within the latter framework of critical functionalism, organic conceptions of social justice serve as a valuable lens with which to identify pathologies within the social body — as we see in the profoundly insightful sociological studies on racism in the United States authored by W. E. B. Du Bois.²³ In this regard, racism, economic exploitation, sexism, and other injustices have been understood as social pathologies needing to be remedied in order to foster the wellbeing of the entire social body.

As the phrase “social justice” became relatively well established in the first half of the twentieth century, tensions embedded in early Western conceptions of social justice increasingly came to the fore. One of these, alluded to above, was the tension between moral equality and meritocratic hierarchy. An even more fundamental tension — at least within the Western liberal tradition — was between equality and freedom. In 1971, John Rawls attempted to resolve this tension by publishing *A Theory of Justice*.²⁴ Based on this enormously influential work, Rawls became one of the most significant political philosophers of the latter twentieth century, and his conception of social justice has to be examined to grasp the subsequent evolution of the discourse on this theme.

In his book, Rawls argues that “justice is the first virtue of social institutions,” and the primary focus of his theory of justice was thus the “basic structure” of society, including its governing political institutions as well as its major social and economic structures.²⁵ Such structures determine the distribution of privilege and deprivation in society, while also shaping people’s expectations and aspirations in this regard. To create the ideal structural foundations for a just society, Rawls argues we must conceptualize society as a system of social cooperation among

23 Refer, for instance, to W. E. B. Du Bois’s use of the social body metaphor in “The Study of the Negro Problem,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* XI (1898). For a deeper discussion of the distinction between naïve and critical functionalism, refer to Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004).

24 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

25 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 3.

free and morally equal persons who must nonetheless function within some degree of social inequality due to the productive necessity of some division of labor. In this regard, a just society is one characterized by maximal fairness across a necessary division of labor and across generations.

To construct such a society, Rawls invokes the Kantian notion of an “original contract.” Through the use of a thought experiment, he arrives at principles of justice he believes should inform this social contract. His thought experiment entails imagining a condition he calls “the original position” in which members of a future society come together to deliberate upon the foundational principles of the social contract. In this original position, Rawls asks us to assume no participant has knowledge of what their talents and abilities will be, of the particular circumstances they will be born into, of the identities they will assume, and of the social positions they will occupy. In addition, Rawls asks us to assume that all participants will be rational and, thus, fair in their assessment of how the basic structure of society will distribute advantages and deprivations — because each will take into account the possibility they will end up in the least advantageous social position.

Rawls argues that, from such a position, reasonable people will agree that the basic structure of society must ensure that every person has an equal right to a framework of basic liberties adequate to ensure human wellbeing. Such a framework, he envisions, would include freedom of thought, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary arrest, the right to due process and fair trials, the right to vote, freedom of the press, and so forth. In addition, Rawls argues that reasonable people will agree the basic structure must be such that any social and economic inequalities arising from it satisfy two conditions. First, all social positions must, in principle, be open to all persons, regardless of their identity, in a manner characterized by equal opportunity and fair competition, underwritten by universal education and other measures. Second, all inequalities must be justified by their necessity as means of ensuring the maximal social benefits to the least advantaged members of society. Acceptable social inequalities are thus ones that increase net social productivity in ways that maximize net benefits to the least well-off members of society. In the absence of such inequalities, the least well-off members would be even worse off.

Rawls also asserts that, from the original position, participants would agree that in order to be sustainable, a society founded on these principles would need to cultivate certain moral attributes. These would include a mature sense of justice — or the intrinsic motivation and ability to apply the principles outlined above in a fair manner, in one's personal life and public deliberations, as the basis of productive social cooperation. These moral attributes would also include the capacity to form a conception of the good — or a schema of aims and values which orients a person's commitments, plans, and pursuits in a meaningful way. Both of these moral powers would, in turn, need to be accompanied by, and exercised through, a cultivated capacity for reason, inference, and judgment.²⁶

As this brief sketch illustrates, Rawls's normative theory embodies a number of elements alluded to earlier. His theory is premised on a latent sense of fairness, or justice, that can be cultivated. It assumes the equal moral worth of every person and a corresponding conception of inherent human rights. It posits a social world that is constructed and can be reconstructed in ways that all people should find fair and acceptable. And it recognizes that every person's contribution to the common good is enabled and constrained by complex forms of social and economic interdependence, all of which are shaped by historical antecedents.

However, in Rawls's theory of justice, the principle of reciprocity no longer plays a central role. This principle, conventionally understood in terms of just desert, or to each their due, is called into question when one recognizes that complex forms of interdependence, shaped by unjust histories, limit the contributions of individuals from oppressed or marginalized social groups (or limit the way those contributions are perceived and valued), while enabling the contributions of those from more privileged groups (or exaggerating the way those contributions are perceived and valued). Therefore, Rawls places the principle of distribution — that is, the fair distribution of social and economic resources and opportunities — at the center of his theory of social justice, as have most other Western theorists of social justice since Rawls.²⁷

26 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*; Rawls, "The Sense of Justice." See also Erin Cline, *Confucius, Rawls, and the Sense of Justice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

27 Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*; Serena Olsaretti, ed., *The Oxford*

In this regard, it is worth noting that we also encountered a distributive conception of justice in Aristotle's work. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas reiterated that conception in *On Law, Morality, and Politics*. But both of those conceptions embodied hierarchical systems of imbalanced reciprocity and thus they were not questioning the basic structure of society. The notion that the basic structure of society should ensure distributive justice independent of a presumed social hierarchy would have been entirely foreign to Aristotle and to virtually all pre-modern Western thinkers. Thus, though Aristotle introduced a valuable concept into Western discourse, his use of the concept bears little resemblance to its contemporary meaning.²⁸

What Rawls and other contemporary theorists have done is bring into focus distributive questions related to the underlying structure and organization of society as a whole. This focus is based on the premise (among others) that inherited social hierarchies one might be born into have no intrinsic merit and, in turn, the unequal life opportunities arising from such socially constructed hierarchies have the effect of differentially enabling or constraining the relative capacities of different people to make meritorious contributions to society.

While these views may have been foreign to many pre-modern thinkers, they became firmly established in the twentieth century. Indeed, as David Miller demonstrates through a review of empirical research on this topic, most citizens of liberal democracies today are "perfectly at home with the notion of social justice" and "are prepared to apply criteria of distributive justice to existing social arrangements."²⁹ However, popular thought about social justice today does not accord neatly with Rawlsian abstractions. Rather, Miller finds that people tend to think about social justice in more intuitive and context dependent ways. In this regard, Miller suggests the overarching concept of social justice tends to be implicitly understood in terms of three distinct principles — desert, need, and equality — that are used to assess the distribution of resources and opportunities within society. In different contexts, including different relationships between social groups, different

Handbook of Distributive Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Ben Jackson, "The Conceptual History of Social Justice," *Political Studies Review* 3 (2005).

28 Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice*.

29 Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, 90.

principles become more salient to different people. In other words, at the level of social psychology, in-group/out-group distinctions often lead to discriminatory perceptions of desert, need, and equality. This is a theme we will return to later. In the meantime, suffice it to say that this problem can be understood as a primary justification for Rawls's effort to articulate a more context-independent theory of justice premised on the need to bracket off our social identities and social positionality as prerequisite for designing the basic structure of a just society.

However, it also important to note that, while Rawls attempted to formulate a context-independent theory of justice in the aforementioned sense, his theory remains quite provincial. The social contract Rawls envisions and the principles of justice in it pertain only to citizens within a society founded on that contract and not to outsiders. It is not, in this sense, a global theory of social justice. Rather, as Rawls acknowledges, its potential application extends only to the boundaries of a modern nation state, and it does not address relations between states.³⁰

In addition, as Rawls himself has acknowledged, his theory of justice embodies many liberal democratic values and premises that are culturally specific and secular.³¹ It is therefore important to situate Rawls's liberal theory of social justice and the broader genealogy of Western secular thought surrounding it in the context of other perspectives, including the many religious perspectives that have contributed to the discourse on social justice. After all, it was the Catholic scholars Antonio Rosmini and Luigi Taparelli who introduced the concept of social justice into modern discourse, and the concept has remained central to Catholic social thought to the present day.³²

Among the most significant insights to emerge from this tradition of thought is the concept of contributive justice. This concept was alluded to over a century ago in the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* by Pope Pius XI (1931), both of which speak of the individual's duty to contribute to the common good, along with society's duty to ensure conditions that enable every individual to

30 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*; John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

31 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*.

32 For a recent discussion of this rich current of thought, see Daniel Finn, ed., *Rethinking Justice in Catholic Thought* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025).

do so. And they both refer to the latter as a demand of justice.

In the mid-1980s, this idea was further elaborated by a U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that distinguished three dimensions of justice. The first, commutative justice, “calls for fundamental fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals or private social groups. It demands respect for the equal human dignity of all persons in economic transactions, contracts, or promises.”³³ The second, distributive justice, “requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet” because “the right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone.”³⁴ And the third, contributive justice, is described in these terms:

Justice also has implications for the way the larger social, economic, and political institutions of society are organized. *Social justice implies that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way.* This form of justice can also be called “contributive,” for it stresses the duty of all who are able to help create the goods, services, and other nonmaterial or spiritual values necessary for the welfare of the whole community. In the words of Pius XI, “It is of the very essence of social justice to demand from each individual all that is necessary for the common good.” Productivity is essential if the community is to have the resources to serve the well-being of all. Productivity, however, cannot be measured solely by its output in goods and services. Patterns of production must also be measured in light of their impact on the fulfillment of basic needs, employment levels, patterns of discrimination, environmental quality, and sense of community.³⁵

Social justice thus “includes a duty to organize economic and social institutions so that people can contribute to society in ways that respect their freedom and the dignity of their labor. Work should enable the working person to become ‘more a human being,’ more capable of

33 Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986), 17.

34 Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 17.

35 Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 17. Italics in the original.

acting intelligently, freely, and in ways that lead to self-realization.”³⁶

These Catholic social teachings on contributive justice make explicit what was implicit in Karl Marx’s prescription “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”³⁷ In 2007, Paul Gomberg tried to articulate a secular theory of contributive justice that draws on this same social prescription by Marx, along with views of human nature that can be traced to Aristotle.³⁸ Gomberg rejects the Western liberal assumption that human conceptions of “the good” are inherently relativistic. Rather, he argues that it is in our nature, as a species, to find intrinsic meaning, value, and reward in contributing to the betterment of society. Accordingly, “contributive justice proposes that each flourishes by advancing the flourishing of others.”³⁹ Meaningful labor directed toward this end can thus be understood as a universal human good.⁴⁰ Elaborating on this theme, Gomberg writes:

Suppose, then, we start from assumptions in the tradition descended from Plato and Aristotle, particularly as it came to be recast by Marx: there is a human nature and a good for man. This good entails at least life as a social being and the development and exercise of human intelligence, particularly through labor that contributes to the social group. The term “labor” must be understood broadly enough to include a wide variety of human activities that we find valuable in one another, and “intelligence” broadly enough to include music, art, craft, social skill, and many other important exercises of complex ability. Through the development of these abilities and their exercise in a way that benefits ourselves and others, we come to think well of ourselves for our social contributions, and others think well of us for the same reason.

36 Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 17.

37 Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

38 Paul Gomberg, *How to Make Opportunity Equal: Race and Contributive Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 152.

39 Paul Gomberg, “Why Distributive Justice is Impossible but Contributive Justice Would Work,” *Science and Society* 80, no. 1 (2016), 31.

40 The conception of meaningful work as a universal human good traces back at least as far as Aristotle. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Aristotle, *The Eudemean Ethics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For compelling contemporary arguments regarding the need to take more seriously the concept of *meaningful work*, see James Bernard Murphy, *The moral economy of labor* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Beate Roessler, “Meaningful Work: Arguments from Autonomy,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012); Andrea Veltman, “Is Meaningful Work Available to All People?,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 41, no. 7.

These, then, seem important goods: to develop our abilities, to exercise developed abilities in labor that contributes to human good, and to earn esteem for those contributions. These may be — I believe they are — uncontroversial enough that they could be accepted as goods that a just society should make available to all. That is, a theory of justice could start, not from purported neutrality about the nature of the good, but from a clear but widely acceptable account of what makes a human life good. From this point of view, the task of a theory of justice is to articulate social norms by which these important goods might be available to all. These are norms of contributive justice.⁴¹

Contributing to the betterment of society is not only a good, Gomberg argues, it is also a moral duty. Echoing Catholic social teachings, he explains that

the sense of justice can and should motivate our working each day. We should work because we seek to live on just terms of cooperation. Working is doing our part in a cooperative venture from which we all benefit. The benefits are both the contributions we make and what we receive. The sense of justice applies in the first instance to what we contribute to the social group in which our lives are embedded. The social group cannot continue and provide for its members unless they contribute labor. This is the first duty of contributive justice.⁴²

Gomberg goes on to elaborate a theory of contributive justice that is primarily a labor theory, inspired partly by Marx's early writing on the alienating nature of labor within capitalism. In this regard, many modern divisions of labor are not merely problematic from the standpoint of distributive justice or because of the grossly inequitable distribution of material rewards associated with various kinds of labor. Often, modern divisions of labor are also problematic because of the grossly inequitable opportunities they afford to engage in work that is meaningful — or work that is interesting, creative, fulfilling, offers a degree of autonomy, and offers opportunities to contribute to organizational decision-making processes.

Meaningful work of this kind tends to be intrinsically rewarding in comparison to routine, tedious, and repetitive tasks that are entirely

41 Gomberg, "Why Distributive Justice is Impossible but Contributive Justice Would Work," 44–45.

42 Gomberg, *How to Make Opportunity Equal: Race and Contributive Justice*, 152.

under the direction of others. Such intrinsically rewarding work also tends to be accompanied by positive social recognition or esteem that supports a sense of dignity and self-worth. Therefore, the question of who is able to contribute to the workplace in what manner and thereby contribute to society as a whole is a matter of contributive justice.

As Gomberg demonstrates, intrinsically rewarding work is confined to a very small portion of workers today, and there are overlapping racial, gender, class, and caste dimensions to who is engaged in such work. Moreover, as Balihar Sanghera demonstrates, the same issues of contributive justice can also arise in the voluntary sector, where people with the most social and cultural capital have better access to the most meaningful forms of labor in volunteer organizations.⁴³ And, as Andrew Sayer demonstrates, all of this has significant implications for the opportunities individuals from different social groups have to develop their latent capacities because the most meaningful forms of work tend to exercise and develop the most complex capabilities.⁴⁴

The analysis of contributive justice by Gomberg, alluded to above, also reveals how competition for, and hoarding of, the most meaningful forms of work convert such work into a scarce resource. More equitable sharing of both routine and complex forms of labor would turn the latter into a commons. Thus, the emergent discourse on contributive justice tends to prescribe mechanisms that promote more sharing of responsibilities for routine forms of labor, alongside more sharing of opportunities for complex forms of labor, within a given workplace and across the economy as a whole.

Michael Sandel extends the preceding arguments by noting that the Western liberal tendency to focus narrowly on distributive justice derives from a reductive understanding of human nature in relation to economic activity. According to this understanding, human beings are primarily consumers, not producers, and the purpose of the economy is to maximize consumer preferences. "The notion that economic policy is ultimately for the sake of consumption," he points out,

43 Balihar Sanghera, "Contributive Justice and Unequal Division of Labour in the Voluntary Sector," *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 2 (2018).

44 Andrew Sayer, "Capabilities, Contributive Justice and Unequal Divisions of Labour," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 13, no. 4 (2012); Andrew Sayer, "Contributive Justice and Meaningful Work," *Res Publica* 15 (2009).

is today so familiar that it is hard to think our way beyond it. "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production," Adam Smith declared in *The Wealth of Nations*, "and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer." John Maynard Keynes echoed Smith, proclaiming that consumption "is the sole end and object of all economic activity," and most contemporary economists agree.⁴⁵

Distributive justice is thus concerned with fair access to the fruits of economic productivity — but not with the nature and meaning of productivity itself. This narrowly distributive focus ignores the human need to feel needed, to feel productive, and to contribute; it ignores the inherent dignity of work; and it ignores the intrinsic relationship between work, social recognition, and self-esteem. In contrast, Sandel argues,

theories of contributive justice teach us that we are most fully human when we contribute to the common good and earn the esteem of our fellow citizens for the contributions we make. According to this tradition, the fundamental human need is to be needed by those with whom we share a common life. The dignity of work consists in exercising our abilities to answer such needs. If this is what it means to live a good life, then it is a mistake to conceive consumption as "the sole end and object of economic activity."⁴⁶

Sandel, like Gombert, thereby conceptualizes contributive justice primarily as a lens for analyzing economic labor. However, if we return to the more expansive Catholic conception of contributive justice, and then expand that beyond concern for individuals, we can recognize the concept's relevance to the broader contributions that diverse social groups can make, collectively, to the betterment of the human condition. In other words, the concept of contributive justice is not simply relevant to aggregates of individuals in economic contexts. It is relevant to entire communities or social groups in every social context.

Understood in this expansive manner, the concept of contributive justice encompasses, and extends well beyond, the narrower concept of distributive justice. Distributive justice is a necessary condition, but

45 Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 209.

46 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, 212.

not a sufficient condition, for contributive justice. To date, however, the discourse on social justice has not yet adequately grappled with this profound insight.

Subaltern Conceptions

The prominent traditions of thought examined above — whether secular or religious — have contributed many insights to the modern discourse on social justice. But in response to such traditions, subaltern voices have articulated other crucial insights that we now turn to.

We use the term *subaltern* here in its original and broad Gramscian sense, as a reference to social groups that are marginalized or excluded by hegemonic cultural formations and the oppressive power relations they embody.⁴⁷ As a “cultural Marxist,” Antonio Gramsci recognized the intractable relationship between unjust economic arrangements and the cultural systems that support them. In this regard, he was primarily concerned with the working classes whose labor is exploited within a capitalist economy and its cultural underpinnings, in urban and rural settings. However, as Gayatri Spivak and other neo-Marxist thinkers have noted, a disproportionate number of subaltern voices are female. Moreover, in the wake of Western colonialism, Indigenous peoples and other racialized populations not considered “White” rank among the most marginalized subaltern groups.⁴⁸

Distributive justice is clearly a concern for many subaltern groups since they have typically been exploited by, excluded from, or denied opportunities within the political and economic arrangements of the societies that surround them. These distributive injustices can clearly impact the development of people’s latent potentialities. But apart from these distributive concerns, subaltern voices have called attention to many other substantive dimensions of social justice.

Consider, for instance, the profound but widely overlooked ways the Haitian revolution, and its associated intellectual history, shaped the

47 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey N Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

48 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

modern discourse on social justice from its inception. As Marlene Daut documents, Haitian revolutionaries were not simply an oppressed people who spontaneously seized an opportunity to take up arms against their oppressors.⁴⁹ Nor were they simply imitating the revolutionary impulses playing out in the American colonies and France. Nor were they passive recipients of Enlightenment-era ideas about freedom, equality, and sovereignty. Rather, they were original thinkers and actors who made major contributions to modern political thought and practice.

As Daut points out, the European Enlightenment, along with the American and French Revolutions, were limited in scope because they accommodated colonialism and slavery. In contrast, Haitian intellectuals — pamphleteers, politicians, scholars, and so forth — made the truly universal argument that freedom and autonomy are natural rights for *all* people. They exposed the hypocrisy of Enlightenment figures who preached liberty and national autonomy while profiting from the slave trade and colonialism. They used legal and philosophical arguments to defend their own freedom and their right to nationhood, and they were the first to articulate rigorous and consistent definitions of these rights and principles. And their arguments did not stay in Haiti. Their arguments forced American and European intellectuals to reckon with the moral and legal bankruptcy of slavery and colonialism, and they served as a global beacon for subsequent movements seeking to overcome slavery and colonialism, along with the racism that underlies both.

Many subaltern contributions to the modern discourse on social justice discourse arose in these contexts. For example, many twentieth-century thinkers concerned with overcoming racism raised awareness about the representational aspects of social justice.⁵⁰ Prominent among these are the need to eliminate socially constructed stigmas and prejudices propagated through discriminatory forms of representation in the arts, literature, journalism, and other media. Such discrimination affects whether, or how, the bodies, views, experiences, values, and cultural expressions

49 Marlene Daut, *Awakening the Ashes: An Intellectual History of the Haitian Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

50 The literature on this topic is vast. See, for instance, bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2014); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Todd Heatherton et al., eds., *The Social Psychology of Stigma* (New York: Guilford Press); Barbara Fields and Karen Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2022).

of marginalized peoples are perceived. This, in turn, affects basic interpersonal relationships and interactions — or the absence of such relations and interactions — through commissions and omissions at the level of everyday behavior, speech, and attitudes. And on an even more fundamental level, it affects the precarity of social groups who, by virtue of the prejudices that are socially attached to them, are disproportionately vulnerable to a wide range of social harms, are under-protected by the law, and are under-supported by social safety nets.⁵¹

It is for these and other reasons that thinkers like bell hooks have drawn attention to the significance of representation. As hooks points out, “representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind.”⁵² Most disturbingly, when harmful representations and relational biases permeate a society, the self-perceptions and self-esteem of stigmatized populations can also be negatively affected, as W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon both wrote compellingly about and as many subsequent empirical studies have demonstrated.⁵³ Therefore, even if we bracket off, for a moment, the distributive economic concerns associated with such discrimination, we must still reckon with universal human aspirations for dignity, respect, and recognition.

The struggle for these less tangible but all-important aspects of social justice is epitomized by generations of Africans who were forcefully enslaved in the Americas and their descendants who have endured ever-mutating expressions of anti-Black racism. Western modernity was constructed, in part, on a foundation of anti-Blackness that, for over four centuries, has fostered conscious and unconscious biases which have become global in their reach and remain deeply entrenched in many societies. Such racism was constructed to rationalize and morally

51 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016).

52 bell hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 3.

53 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]); Kenneth Clark, *Effect of Prejudice and Discrimination on Personality Development* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1950); Toni Sturdivant, “‘I’m Gonna Cook My Baby in a Pot’: Young Black Girls’ Racial Preferences and Play Behavior,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 49 (2020).

justify dehumanizing conditions of enslaved labor that directly financed the industrial revolution and the emergence of modern capitalism.⁵⁴ The concentrations of wealth and technological power thus accrued enabled Western nations to subsequently construct extractive political and economic relationships across much of the planet, extending well beyond the colonial era and buttressed by conscious and unconscious sentiments of White supremacy.⁵⁵

Thus, as Western modernity has enveloped much of the globe, so too has anti-Blackness, an evolving, protean thought regime that works to stigmatize those deemed Black, wherever and whenever they have been found.⁵⁶ Accordingly, struggles for social justice within the African diaspora, on the African continent, and among dark-skinned Indigenous peoples across South Asia and Australasia, are, in part, struggles for dignity, respect, and recognition of their shared humanity as well as the ways their distinctive traditions and experiences have enriched and continue to enrich humanity. Related concerns characterize the struggles of Indigenous peoples across the Americas, Southeast Asia, and other regions that have also suffered a long history of dehumanization, which can once again impact the development of people's latent potentialities. In this regard, social justice requires us to recognize our full humanity in one another across all secondary lines of difference.⁵⁷

A related aspect of social justice many subaltern groups articulate,

54 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944); Ira Beckles, "Capitalism, Slavery and Caribbean Modernity," *Callaloo* 20, no. 4 (1997); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Sven Beckert and Seth Rothman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

55 Walter Mignolo, Rita Segato, and Catherine Walsh, eds., *Anibal Quijano: Foundational Essays on the Coloniality of Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024); Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

56 Moon-Kie Jung and João Costa Vargas, eds., *Antiblackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Gargi Roysircar, Sam Steen, and Kaye Cole, *Anti-Black Racism in Contemporary America* (San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing 2021); Christopher Collins, Christopher Newman, and Alexander Jun, *Global White Supremacy: Anti-Blackness and the University as Colonizer* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023); Derik Smith, "Centering the 'Pupil of the Eye': Blackness, Modernity, and the Revelation of Baha'u'llah," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 29, no. 1–2 (2019): 11.

57 Stephanie Latty et al., "Not Enough Human: At the Scenes of Indigenous and Black Dispossession," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016), 135.

which hearkens back to the aims of the Haitian revolution, is the desire for cultural autonomy — or the desire to pursue their own developmental path on their own terms.⁵⁸ In some cases, especially with many Indigenous peoples, this extends to the desire for political sovereignty, or self-governance. In the early modern era, such aspirations were articulated in response to the homogenizing cultural influences of colonialism along with its paternalistic notions of governance — both of which were enforced through violence, reservations, broken treaties, abusive residential schools, and other unjust means. In the late modern era, homogenizing cultural influences continue to be perpetuated, to varying degrees, through school and university curricula, film and television, literature and music, advertising and marketing, and global capitalism itself. Meanwhile, paternalistic notions continue to pervade not only many nation states in their relations to Indigenous and other subaltern groups, but also the ways many religious institutions, development organizations, non-profit agencies, and philanthropic foundations engage such groups.

Against this backdrop, many subaltern communities aspire not merely for recognition on the terms set by the dominant social order. They often aspire for a deeper recognition, which requires that dominant populations make space for and learn to co-exist alongside other social or cultural formations that enable distinct populations to flourish and contribute to the betterment of humanity in self-affirming ways beyond the dictates of the dominant social order.⁵⁹ Within such a framework, distinct populations would be free to draw on their respective cultural histories and repertoires not as stigmatized stereotypes, nor as museum exhibits frozen in the imaginations of dominant social groups, but as living communities that adapt to changing conditions in self-determined ways according to their own cultural logic and aspirations.

For instance, the Quechua concept *sumak kawsay*, the Aymara concept *suma qamaña*, and the Mapuche concept *küme mongen* (which are often

58 See, for example, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011); Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Matthew Wildcat and Justin de Leon, "Creative Sovereignty: The In-Between Space: Indigenous Sovereignties in Creative and Comparative Perspective," *Borderlands Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020).

59 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

translated into the Spanish phrase *buen vivir* or “good living”) allude to worldviews, or ways of living, centered on living in harmony with oneself, one’s community, one’s ancestors, the natural world, and the spiritual dimensions of existence. Such concepts are invoked today as more expansive visions of well-being that go beyond the narrow materialism of Western “development” trajectories.⁶⁰

As Glen Coulthard explains, Indigenous communities seek to “reestablish themselves as truly self-determining: as creators of the terms, values, and conditions on which they are to be recognized.”⁶¹ Such communities would be recognized on their own terms, interacting with other communities as equals. In post-colonial contexts, they would be free to reject the extreme individualism and competitive social norms that are endemic to Western liberal societies and seek to elevate principles such as collectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality.⁶² In the context of other dominant civilizations, they would similarly be free to pursue distinct and autonomous paths of development — paths that are not defined by the logic of dominant social orders but by their own logic. In this vision of social justice, the boundaries of cultural creativity and social innovation would be expanded for humanity as a whole as diversity becomes a source of rich contributions to collective flourishing rather than the cause of endemic social pathologies.

Of course, such a vision raises enormously complex transitional questions — questions of decolonization and transitional justice — especially in the case of Indigenous populations seeking political sovereignty and self-governance.⁶³ How will land claim disputes be resolved in cases where historical treaties were never entered into?

60 Natasha Chassagne, *Buen Vivir as an Alternative to Sustainable Development* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

61 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 39.

62 For an insightful discussion of this theme, refer to Sandy Grande, “Refusing the University,” in *Toward What Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (New York: Routledge, 2018).

63 Lewis Gordon, *Freedom, Justice, and Decolonization* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Chris Cunneen et al., eds., *The Routledge International Handbook on Decolonizing Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2023); David Myer Temin, *Remapping Sovereignty: Decolonization and Self-Determination in North American Indigenous Political Thought* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Khanyisela Moyo, *Postcolonial Transitional Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Ruti Teitel, *Globalizing Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

How might treaties be renegotiated when they were entered into under coercive conditions or false pretexts? What reparations are appropriate when treaties have been broken by the same colonial powers that imposed them? What reparations might now address the multi-generational abuses and losses suffered by so many Indigenous populations, and other oppressed populations, such as formerly enslaved peoples? And for Indigenous peoples, what does political sovereignty mean now in the context of economic interdependencies, interconnected energy grids, cross-cutting transportation networks, and other intractable ties to surrounding settler societies? Moreover, what does political sovereignty mean in light of a growing recognition that some aspects of the Westphalian model of national sovereignty are becoming obsolete in the face of ever-increasing global interdependence and the consequent need for robust mechanisms of global coordination? The complexity of these questions notwithstanding, they embody legitimate aspirations that have frequently been ignored or obscured in dominant discourses on social justice.

Another closely related aspect of social justice is epistemological. It is now widely understood that oppressive power relations can play a role in constructing bodies of knowledge, and bodies of knowledge can conversely play a role in legitimizing those same oppressive relations of power.⁶⁴ It is also widely understood that such power relations determine whose voices, perspectives, and knowledge is taken seriously in everyday interpersonal encounters, in the work place, in public forums, and so forth.⁶⁵

This power/knowledge nexus is increasingly understood in terms of epistemic injustice.⁶⁶ The underlying concern, in this regard, is with whose epistemic contributions are encouraged, recognized, valued, and incorporated into collective thought and decision making, and ultimately into bodies of knowledge upon which human flourishing depends. Overcoming epistemic injustice requires universal participation in

64 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

65 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

66 Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Jr. Gaile Pohlhaus, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Benjamin Sherman, ed., *Overcoming Epistemic Injustice: Social and Psychological Perspectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge — especially by those who are most familiar with the experience of injustice and oppression and whose insights are crucial to the construction of a more just world.

In this regard, the homogenizing forces of modernity are not just political and economic. Ways of knowing and shared systems of knowledge have also been homogenized — leading to what Vandana Shiva calls “monocultures of the mind.”⁶⁷ One outcome of this trend is what others, such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, call epistemicide, which has resulted in irreversible losses of valuable knowledge in many distinct populations and thus for humanity as a whole.⁶⁸

These losses — or erasures — include not only the loss of practical forms of knowledge such as Indigenous pharmacopeia and agricultural practices developed over millennia in diverse ecological contexts, valuable as those are. They also include social, psychological, and spiritual knowledge or insight about what it means to be human, how to live meaningful and productive lives in relationship with others and in relation to the natural world, and even how to develop social forms of resilience and creativity under conditions of oppression. Such knowledge is not only embodied in texts from literate traditions or narratives from oral traditions that can be erased, it is also tacitly embodied in social practices, processes, rituals, vocabularies, and artistic expressions that can likewise be erased.⁶⁹

In short, though modernity has been associated with an explosion of scientific knowledge, especially on fronts that are commercially profitable or militarily advantageous, the narrow epistemological thrust of modernity has come at a high cost. The existential threats now facing humanity, which have arisen largely as a consequence of scientific advancements narrowly pursued and applied, illustrate the need for a much wider range of epistemological resources to draw on in our collective efforts to learn how to live together successfully under conditions of ever-increasing

67 Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the mind: perspectives on biodiversity and biotechnology* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

68 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge, 2014); Bernd Reiter, *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

69 Refer, for instance, to Esiaba Irobi, “Philosophy of the Sea: History, Economics, and Reason in the Caribbean Basin,” *Worlds & Knowledge Otherwise* 1, no. 3 (2006).

interdependence on an increasingly small planet.

Such an acknowledgement need not lead to an anti-scientific posture or a rejection of methodological rigor in the generation of knowledge in modern research institutions. Rather it calls for a progressive clarification of both the powers and limitations of modern scientific knowledge, an expansion of the range of methodologies by which knowledge is generated and an appreciation of the wider “ecology of knowledges” within which science must be situated.⁷⁰ This ecology of knowledges includes valuable forms of subaltern knowledge.

Appreciating the value of diverse ways of knowing, diverse contexts of knowing, and diverse systems of shared knowledge need not lead to extreme epistemological relativism — or to the view that all knowledge is purely a social construct and thus the relative merit of specific knowledge claims can never be assessed in relation to any deeper ontological truths. All forms of knowledge can and must be tested against reality, in appropriate ways, if they are to support human flourishing. Though human comprehension will always be limited in relation to the infinite complexity of reality, it is possible to increase our collective attunement to certain aspects of reality over time. It is also possible to increase the embodiment of normative truths about social existence — such as the role of justice as an essential principle of social organization that underlies human flourishing — in the social arrangements we construct.⁷¹ Indeed, epistemological diversity increases our capacities to advance the generation of knowledge by testing truth claims and decisions against reality in these ways.⁷²

70 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Ecologies of Knowledge,” in *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge, 2014); Norma Gonzalez, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti, eds., *Funds of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Nicole Mirra, Antero Garcia, and Ernest Morrell, *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Bunmi Isaiah Omodan, *Participatory Action Research in Post-Colonial Contexts: Decolonial Approaches for Sustainable Social Change, Community Empowerment, and Equity* (New York: Routledge, 2025); Sweeney Windchief and Timothy San Pedro, eds., *Applying Indigenous Research Methods: Storying with Peoples and Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

71 Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá’í Studies, 2020).

72 Nancy Cantor and Earl Lewis, *Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Scott Page, *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Taylor Cox Jr., *Creating the Multicultural Organization: A Strategy for Capturing the Power of Diversity* (San

Thus, our choice is not between the false universalism of narrowly misguided knowledge claims, on one hand, and extreme relativism, on the other. Rather, as Syed Hussein Alatas, Syed Farid Alatas, and Vineeta Sinha argue, universally relevant insights become possible when peoples from diverse cultural and historical traditions are empowered to fully participate in the global project of knowledge generation in autonomous ways that are free from domination by externally imposed traditions.⁷³ Broadly similar arguments have been advanced by many other subaltern scholars, from Vandana Shiva to Alberto Guerreiro Ramos.⁷⁴

Furthermore, it must be noted that epistemic justice is not only about preserving or developing diverse traditions of knowledge in support of human flourishing. It is also about overcoming *epistemologies of ignorance* — or overcoming the systematic cultivation of ignorance within a population for the self-interested ends of powerful social groups.⁷⁵ This includes the cultivation of ignorance regarding significant aspects of history, ignorance of exploitative relations and oppressive conditions some groups benefit from in the past and present, ignorance of other meaningful and productive ways of living, and even ignorance of those things that lead to a meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling life that aligns the development of one's latent capacities with the betterment of the world. Of course, the cultivation of ignorance is not new, and it has long been wedded to the self-interests of privileged social groups. But as subaltern communities gain their full voice in the global discourse on social justice, and as the mechanisms of epistemological ignorance are increasingly exposed, this dimension of the struggle for social justice is coming more clearly into focus.

Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

- 73 Syed Farid Alatas, "The Study of the Social Sciences in Developing Societies: Towards an Adequate Conceptualization of Relevance," *Current Sociology* 49, no. 2 (2001); Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Development of an Autonomous Social Science Tradition in Asia: Problems and Prospects," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, no. 1 (2002); Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha, *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon* (London: Springer, 2017).
- 74 Alberto Guerreiro Ramos, *A Redução Sociológica* [*Sociological Reduction*], 2nd edn. (Rio de Janeiro: ISEB [Advanced Institute of Brazilian Studies], 1965); Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*.
- 75 See, for example, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (New York: State University of New York Press); Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Concerns about the cultural and epistemological aspects of justice discussed above invite us to take even more seriously the concept of contributive justice, even as those concerns beckon us to understand the concept in its most expansive sense. Contributive justice is relevant not only to individuals. It is also relevant to entire social groups or communities with shared experiences and interpretations, shared aspirations to make distinct contributions to the betterment of humanity, and shared desires to see those contributions recognized and valued. Moreover, such contributions have to be valued not simply on terms set by the dominant social order. Rather, we are called to recognize such contributions on the terms of an emergent social order premised on the enriching value of diverse cultural and epistemological contributions.

Consider, in this regard, how the narrow concept of distributive justice and the more expansive concept of contributive justice each frame how we understand the relationship between a dominant social order and marginalized populations within it. The concept of distributive justice helps us recognize that marginalized populations don't have equitable access to resources and opportunities within that social order, and it invites us to redistribute resources and opportunities within the framework of that dominant order. Contributive justice encompasses this insight and this invitation. But it goes much further by also helping us recognize that marginalized populations were not full partners in shaping the existing social order, and it welcomes them to contribute as equals to the co-creation of a new, more just, social order.

The concept of contributive justice also requires that we not overlook the inestimable contributions subaltern populations have already made to the advancement of human productivity and innovation and to enriching the human condition.⁷⁶ Subaltern labor was the economic engine that drove the industrial revolution.⁷⁷ Subaltern knowledge, ingenuity, and invention made indispensable, though still largely

76 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: Viking Press, 1947); Sujan Dass, *Black People Invented Everything: The Deep History of Indigenous Creativity* (Atlanta, GA: Supreme Design Publishing, 2020); R. Douglas Hurt, *Indian Agriculture in America: Prehistory to the Present* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988); Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World* (London: Verso, 2017).

77 Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*; Beckles, "Capitalism, Slavery and Caribbean Modernity"; Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*; Beckert and Rothman, *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*.

unacknowledged, contributions to the modern scientific revolution.⁷⁸ Subaltern contributions have also made unparalleled contributions in fields such as the arts, as the global impact of African American musicians and other artists illustrates. It should thus be clear that subaltern populations have always been making contributions that have enriched humanity as whole — though not under conditions of their choosing, nor with appropriate recognition, nor with equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Contributive justice requires a reasonable degree of autonomy, appropriate forms of recognition and encouragement, and equitable access to resources and opportunities. In this regard, Amartya Sen's effort to conceptualize the relationship between justice, freedom, the development of individual capabilities, and community wellbeing offers important insights.⁷⁹ In brief, Sen argues that the most meaningful indicators of social justice are the capabilities that members of a society actualize in their efforts to achieve meaningful lives they see value in. Such developmental processes hinge on a wide range of conditions such as freedom from violence or discrimination; basic political and economic freedoms; access to sufficient forms of shelter, nourishment, health care, education, employment, and transportation; and other less tangible requisites of individual and community wellbeing.

With such conditions in mind, Sen argues that a meaningful theory of social justice must do more than merely prescribe an ideal social contract and the ideal institutional arrangements that support it (as Rawls attempted), because such ideals are unattainable abstractions, at least in the foreseeable future. Rather, a theory of social justice that

78 Robin Oliver Walker, *Blacks and Science Volume One: Ancient Egyptian Contributions to Science and Technology* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Publishing, 2013); Robin Oliver Walker, *Blacks and Science Volume Two: West and East African Contributions to Science and Technology & Intellectual Life and Legacy of Timbuktu* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Publishing, 2013); Robin Oliver Walker, *Blacks and Science Volume Three: African American Contributions to Science and Technology* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Publishing, 2013); Rachel Swaby, *Headstrong: 52 Women Who Changed Science — and the World* (Portland, OR: Broadway Books, 2015).

79 Amartya Sen, "Equality of What?," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Sterling MacMurrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999). See also Siddiqur Rahman Osmani, "Theory of Justice for an Imperfect World: Exploring Amartya Sen's Idea of Justice," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 11, no. 4 (2010).

is relevant to the present should inform practical efforts to make the world more socially just — where social justice is understood as positive movement along a continuum of social conditions.

In this context, Sen recognizes that our innate sense of justice, when developed, can motivate people to work, in practical ways, for social change. Given the universality of our latent sense of justice, he posits, processes of public reasoning and deliberation can enable communities of individuals to intersubjectively assess the relative embodiment of justice in different social conditions and work for conditions that are comparatively more just. Based on the role played by individuals and communities in this regard, Sen argues that the comparative realization of justice within a society depends not only on its institutional arrangements. It also depends on the attitudes, behaviors, and capabilities of its individuals, as well as the collective norms, practices, and capabilities of its communities. Relative advancement on the path toward social justice thus depends on mutually influential processes and relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions.

Building on Sen's work, Martha Nussbaum argues that social justice is not achieved until even the most marginalized social groups have genuine opportunities to develop and exercise essential capabilities needed to live a meaningful and dignified life.⁸⁰ For Nussbaum, these capabilities include being able to live out a normal life span under conditions worth living; being able to secure adequate health (including reproductive health), nourishment, and shelter; being able to ensure bodily integrity (including freedom from sexual assault and choice in matters of reproduction) along with freedom of movement; being able to use one's senses, imagine, think, and reason in ways that are cultivated by an adequate education, and that offer opportunities to make creative cultural contributions with freedom of expression; being able to have emotional attachments to things and people, to love and grieve, to experience longing and gratitude and justified anger, and not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety; being able to form a reasoned conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life; being able to live and freely affiliate with others, to recognize and show concern for others,

80 Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006).

to imagine the situation of another, to have self-respect and avoid humiliation, and to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others; being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature; being able to laugh, to play, and to enjoy recreational activities; being able to exercise reasonable control over one's environment, to participate in political choices and processes, to hold property on an equal basis with others, to seek meaningful employment on an equal basis with others, and to be free from unwarranted search and seizure.⁸¹

Some subaltern thinkers argue, in turn, that of all the conditions needed to advance on the path of social justice, the most important is humane love for "the other," cultivated widely within a society.⁸² As Cornel West states, "Justice is what love looks like in public."⁸³ In the words of bell hooks, "Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth... The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change."⁸⁴ Similarly, Paulo Freire wrote about love as an essential source of motivation and encouragement in struggles for social justice.⁸⁵ For Freire, love is not a sentimental notion but an ethical commitment with real political implications. It serves as the foundation for solidarity among the oppressed. And, when directed toward the oppressor, love is an act of courage that can transform the latter by enabling them to overcome their own dehumanization and by creating conditions for authentic dialogue. Only by extending such love, Freire argues, can the oppressed avoid replicating the oppressor and thereby break the cycle of oppression.

81 Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

82 James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); James Lawson Jr., *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022); Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Virginia Held, ed., *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also Paul Ricoeur, "Love and Justice," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 5/6 (1995).

83 Refer, for example, to his 17 April 2011 speech at Howard University or his 24 October 2017 speech at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

84 bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 16–17.

85 Antonia Darder, "Pedagogy of Love: Embodying Our Humanity," in *Freire and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

These and many other subaltern voices suggest that a Rawlsian social contract, by itself, will never provide an adequate foundation for social justice. Social justice ultimately needs to rest on a shared moral covenant grounded in a relational worldview and supported by corresponding affective bonds.⁸⁶ Such a worldview finds broad expression in some Indigenous and traditional cultures — including traditional African cultures. One expression of this relational worldview, according to Layli Maparyan, is the way *kinship* serves as an organizing principle across many African cosmologies, extending from families to communities to humanity as a whole. In the context of this ever-expanding circle of kinship, Maparyan argues that Africana relational norms or rules can serve as a basis for social cohesion, social order, and social justice in ways that can mitigate the force of competing needs, agendas, and aspirations.⁸⁷

One of the most widely cited illustrations of this relational worldview today is the Bantu concept of *ubuntu*.⁸⁸ As Jacob Rugare Mugumbate and Admire Chereni explain, “Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that Black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing

86 Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economies, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality* (Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016).

87 Layli Maparyan, “Africanicity, Womanism, and Constructive Resilience: Some Reflections,” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 30, no. 3 (2020).

88 Like most concepts, *ubuntu* is invoked with different inflections, and political philosophers have only recently begun systematizing the concept. As Nnodim and Okigbo argue, “The concept of *ubuntu*, though similar in meaning across Bantu cultures, varies in its practical application as an ethical principle. In Southern Africa, the idea, its interpretation, and applications in the domains of politics, economics, and social relations have also evolved, especially since the 1950s... Its South African (Nguni) usage gained discursive ascendancy in international intellectual circles, following especially its ‘theologization’ by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who as the co-chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) located *ubuntu* at the core of the founding principle and process of the TRC... As *ubuntu* becomes systematized in the philosophical literature, it also shoulders multiple interpretive voices, thus leaving its meaning and contemporary applications open to intellectual contestations. That said, there is something that stays fundamental to *ubuntu* as an African social philosophy and ethical principle despite the multiple interpretive voices, one that allows us to examine it within a specific context of social praxis, to highlight its similarities with Rawls’s justice as fairness and perhaps in so doing explore questions about its universalizability.” Paul Nnodim and Austin Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity,” *Ethical Perspectives* 27, no. 1 (2020), 71.

— an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.”⁸⁹

In an insightful analysis of ubuntu as a framework of social justice, Paul Nnodim and Austin Okigbo compare it with Rawls’s influential conception of *justice as fairness*.⁹⁰ In Rawls’s conception — and in Western discourse more generally — individual rights, liberties, and subjectivities take priority over communal values, norms, and wellbeing.⁹¹ In contrast, Nnodim and Okigbo argue that a sound theory of social justice can neither privilege the individual over the community nor the community over the individual. The concept of ubuntu, they argue, harmonizes the two.⁹² But they also note that ubuntu is only one element in a wider system of concepts needed to harmonize the aspirations and needs of individuals and communities in the pursuit of social justice. To illustrate

89 Jacob Rugare Mugumbate and Admire Chereni, “Now, the Theory of Ubuntu Has Its Space in Social Work,” *African Journal of Social Work* 10, no. 1 (2020), xi.

90 Nnodim and Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity.”

91 Some Western liberal thinkers argue that collectivist cultures, and invocations of social harmony, are inherently oppressive because they prioritize communal harmony over individual rights and liberties, and they stifle dissent in struggles for justice. See, for instance, Laura Nader, *Harmony Ideology: Justice and Control in a Zapotec Mountain Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press); Laura Nader, “Harmony Models and the Construction of Law,” in *Conflict Resolution: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Avruch, Peter Black, and Joseph Scimecca (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013); Mary Schweitzer, “Harmony Ideology Works at the Mill,” in *Anthropological Contributions to Conflict Resolution*, ed. Alvin Wolfe and Honggang Yang (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996). As these scholars demonstrate, oppression in the name of collectivist values is a legitimate concern. Examples abound, from the ancient Hindu caste system to modern Stalinism and Maoism. But inverse examples — that is, entire communities oppressed in the name of liberal individualism — also abound. Indeed, the early modern colonial order was constructed through the oppression of indigenous and other racialized communities in the name of individual liberties for White elites, and the legacies of this oppression continue in various forms today.

92 “Ubuntu,” they explain, “revolves around a sense of community that celebrates human dignity, value, and worth, and which sees the development of self-identity as the result of a dialectical back and forth or give and take action between an individual and his or her community. The human person is thus a creative expression of individuality within the matrix of the social community. It is the community that shapes the individual and ubuntu is the thread that links one member of the community with the other regardless of their social or economic background.” Nnodim and Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity,” 70–71.

this, they examine the way *ubuntu* interacts with the concepts of *ukuphila* (wellbeing) and *indaba* (consultative or deliberative processes within a community). As they explain, *ukuphila* “is tied to *ubuntu* because the collective humanity of the community consists in the wellbeing of every member of the community” while *indaba* “provides the people the means to evaluate continuously the conditions that affect the community and to ensure the sustenance of *ubuntu* through a collective *ukuphila*.”⁹³ To the extent such conditions are realized in practice, “every individual is helped, not hindered, to realize his or her full human potentials.”⁹⁴ Within this system of concepts, they argue, “a person is a creative articulation of his or her individuality within the matrix of the social community,” even as “individuality partly transcends the community.”⁹⁵

Nnodim and Okigbo proceed to reinterpret Rawls’s conception of justice in ways that complement, rather than contradict, an ubuntu-based conception of social justice. Toward this end, they point out many areas of overlapping agreement between the two culturally distinct conceptions. These include preserving the inherent dignity of the individual, recognizing the social matrix individuals inhabit, and prescribing public deliberation as a means of reconciling diverse interests in the face of ever-changing conditions. Thus, they conclude, “The ideals of these two moral and philosophical concepts are compatible, can complement each other, and together, perhaps, form the basis for the future discourse on human-ness, humanity, and justice for Africa, the West, and the rest of the world.”⁹⁶

If we accept that social justice ultimately depends on a relational worldview that entails implicit moral obligations of contributive justice across lines of difference, and if such obligations extend to humanity as a whole, then contributive justice has a global dimension that must be explicitly acknowledged and addressed. This is a theme that emerges from the discourse on global justice, to which we will turn in a moment.

93 Nnodim and Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity,” 79–80.

94 Nnodim and Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity,” 81.

95 Nnodim and Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity,” 86–87.

96 Nnodim and Okigbo, “Justice as Fairness and Ubuntu: Conceptualizing Justice through Human Dignity,” 89.

However, before we do that, it is important to recognize that many of the subaltern voices and perspectives engaged above are grounded in spiritual or religious traditions of thought. And beyond those specific voices we've directly engaged, many of the themes we've explored are echoed by countless others who draw on similar traditions.

Consider, for instance, the insights into social justice articulated by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, Reverend Dr. Prathia Hall, Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, Reverend Joseph Lowery, Dorothy Height, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Diane Nash, and countless others who drew on religious traditions of thought and practice to propel the advancement of the U.S. civil rights movement. Or consider the profound contributions of the liberation theology movement in Latin America inspired and advanced by Gustavo Gutiérrez, María Pilar Aquino, Jon Sobrino, Ivone Gebara, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Juan Luis Segundo, Elsa Tamez, Leonardo Boff, Ana María Pineda, Beatriz Melano Couch, and countless others. Or consider the insights that have been articulated in modern Islamic struggles for social justice by Amina Wadud, Annitta Kynsilehto, Omid Safi, Asghar Ali Engineer, Shadaab Rahemtulla, Hamid Dabashi, and countless others. For many such thought leaders, the struggle for social justice is in part a spiritual struggle premised on the existence of the soul, on the inherent moral worth of every soul, and on the need to create social conditions in which every soul can, with dignity, develop their latent capacities to contribute to the betterment of the world.

Finally, contemporary subaltern voices are often concerned with environmental justice.⁹⁷ Heavy industries and other sources of pollution are disproportionately located among marginalized communities, with

97 Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2020); Robert Bullard and Maxine Waters, *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2005); Julian Agyeman, *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020); David Naguib Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Boston, MA: Polity, 2017); Michael Mascarenhas, *Lessons in Environmental Justice: From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter and Idle No More* (London: Sage, 2020); Nadia Kim, *Refusing Death: Immigrant Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice in LA* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

detrimental consequences for health and wellbeing. Such communities tend to disproportionately lack access to urban green spaces and other health-promoting features of good urban design and investment. And even in rural areas, marginalized communities are more likely to suffer from exposure to agro-industrial waste and related concerns. Subaltern populations around the planet are also disproportionately impacted by rising sea levels, rising temperatures, droughts, and severe weather events due to global warming.⁹⁸ In all of these contexts, those who are the least responsible for these environmental problems and who have benefitted the least from the economic arrangements that created these problems are those who tend to suffer most from the consequences and, as the discourse on environmental racism brings into focus, these are often people of color.⁹⁹ Again, such injustices can clearly impact the development of people's latent capacities to contribute to the betterment of the world.

Global Conceptions

Modernity has been characterized by ever-increasing awareness of the conditions of distant others and the causes of those conditions — an awareness made possible through widespread advancements in literacy, education, and communication. Such conditions include growing disparities of wealth and poverty within and among nations, mass displacements of populations due to violence and conflict, uneven vulnerabilities to transnational pandemics, and disparate impacts of pollution, environmental degradation, and climate change. The underlying causes of these conditions include, among other things,

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- 98 Environmental Protection Agency, *Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States*, EPA 430-R-21-003 (Washington, DC: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021); Lisa Reyes Mason and Jonathan Rigg, *People and Climate Change: Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Neil Leary et al., eds., *Climate Change and Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
 - 99 Luke Cole and Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2001); Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); Robert Bullard, ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices From the Grassroots* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1999); Ingrid Waldron, *There's Something in the Water: Environmental Racism in Indigenous & Black Communities* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2018).

the global legacies of colonialism and imperialism, often rationalized by racism; the impact of transnational capitalism; and the ongoing dominance of disproportionately powerful nations and global elites acting in narrowly self-interested ways.

In this context, it should not surprise us that movements for social justice are increasingly adopting global perspectives. Before examining how such perspectives can enrich our conceptions, it is important to acknowledge that dominant traditions of Western thought have tended to preclude the possibility of social justice on a global scale.

Until recently, many social and political thinkers in the Western tradition have assumed that social justice obligations cannot be extended beyond the basic structure of the nation state because no global state exists to structure transnational relationships in a just manner. Nor should a global state exist, the thinking often goes, because there would be nothing to prevent it from becoming an oppressive global hegemon. Furthermore, the emergence of modern sociology was premised on conceptions of society as coterminous with the nation state. As Ulrich Beck wrote, even after the opening of the twenty-first century, "It is a nation-state outlook on society and politics, law, justice and history, that governs the sociological imagination."¹⁰⁰ Thus, the Western discourse on social justice continues to be framed, to some extent, by methodological nationalism — or the view that nation states constitute the natural limits of political organization and should be the fundamental unit of analysis regarding the basic structures of society. In this regard, things have not changed that much since Anthony Giddens bluntly asserted, half a century ago, that "the primary unit of sociological analysis, the sociologist's 'society' — in relation to the industrialized world at least — has always been, and must continue to be, the administratively bounded nation-state."¹⁰¹

On the other hand, many subaltern voices have long rejected methodological nationalism because it has undergirded colonial and post-colonial systems of domination, has obscured the shared experiences and concerns of diasporic populations, has limited the legitimate movement

100 Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 287.

101 Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 265.

and aspirations of dislocated populations, and has thus limited the advance of diverse global movements for social justice.¹⁰² For instance, W. E. B. Du Bois argues that preoccupation with the nation state as a primary unit of analysis obscured one of the most significant characteristics of modernity: the causally interconnected relationships between the structures of empire, the ideology of race, and the transnational concentration of capital — all of which worked to distort democratic processes and undermine sovereignty within nation states.¹⁰³ In the face of this global system, Du Bois called for transnational solidarity of all oppressed and exploited peoples in the struggle for global justice.

Such voices notwithstanding, it is instructive to consider arguments against the possibility of social justice on a global scale, rooted in methodological nationalism, before examining in more depth a range of arguments for a global conception. Consider, once again, Rawls's influential theory of social justice. Rawls explicitly limits his theory to the boundaries of a modern liberal nation state because his theory presumes a culturally specific set of political institutions and norms that include constitutional democracy, pluralism, individualism, and so forth.¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, according to Rawls, beyond the boundaries of such a state, it is not possible to construct institutions that can ensure the basic structure of society is just. When pressed to consider justice in a global context, he envisions only an international "Law of Peoples" that liberal societies might enter into with non-liberal but still "decent" societies that liberal societies considered to be stable and well-ordered enough to tolerate and work with.¹⁰⁵ The Law of Peoples would exclude societies judged intolerable due to their expansionist military ambitions, egregious human rights abuses, and other unacceptable behaviors.

102 See, for example, Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Minhao Zeng, "Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: Concept and Approaches," *The Sociological Review* 62, no. 1 (2014).

103 W. E. B. Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois: International Thought*, ed. Adom Getachew and Jennifer Pitts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Andrea M. Slater, "W.E.B. Du Bois' Transnationalism: Building a Collective Identity among the American Negro and the Asian Indian," *Phylon* 51, no. 1 (2014); Inés Valdez, *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019).

104 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*.

105 Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*.

In Rawls's view, societies that enter into such a Law of Peoples would be committing to the following principles, on the assumption these principles can be rationally arrived at from a global "original position" of peoples as a whole. First, peoples are free and independent, and their freedom and independence must be respected by other peoples. Second, peoples are equal and are parties to their own agreements. Third, peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to war. Fourth, peoples are to observe a duty of non-intervention. Fifth, peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings. Sixth, peoples are to observe certain specified restrictions on the conduct of war. Seventh, peoples are to honor human rights. And eighth, peoples have a duty to assist other peoples who live under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime.¹⁰⁶

In the context of such an agreement, Rawls assumes that "decent" peoples might become more liberal over time, as their relationships with liberal states deepen and they come to appreciate the benefits of liberalism (though he says nothing about whether liberal peoples might also become more decent over time; he simply assumes liberal states are already decent — which is an arguable assumption). He also assumes that excluded intolerable regimes might liberalize over time to reap the political and economic benefits of joining the Law of Peoples.

Despite these potentially liberalizing tendencies, Rawls asserts that the Law of Peoples can never deliver true "justice as fairness" among states because such justice is, in his view, only possible within a liberal society whose citizens recognize the equal moral worth of all people and thereby possess a moral psychology leading them to press responsive democratic institutions into regulating the distribution of socioeconomic benefits and burdens in the interest of socioeconomic cooperation. Non-liberal societies presumably do not share these characteristics. More generally, Rawls also assumes that the democratic institutions, cultural ties, in-group affinities, and the sense of common identity that can exist within a liberal nation state cannot exist on a global scale, which further undermines the moral psychology needed to support distributive justice on a global scale. Furthermore, Rawls assumes that global economic disparities are attributable, in large part,

106 Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 37.

to the cultural character of nations — their moral traditions, political norms, policies, industriousness, and innovativeness — and therefore he believes redistributive justice cannot be justified across nations because the character of some nations makes them more worthy of economic prosperity than others at any given time.

Within this framework of assumptions, Rawls concludes that our highest reasonable aspiration — at least in the foreseeable future — should be to reduce or eliminate the greatest international threats to human wellbeing, such as war between nations. This aim, he assumes, requires us to take secondary considerations such as global distributive justice off the table in the hope that, over time, liberalizing processes will at least make distributive justice possible within an increasing number of nation states. Though globally-minded critics have challenged many of Rawls's assumptions, his prescriptions can be understood as rational and pragmatic within the framework of methodological nationalism.

Another influential argument against the possibility of global justice is found in Thomas Nagel's article "The Problem of Global Justice."¹⁰⁷ Nagel echoes Rawls's view that the nation state is the primary locus of the pursuit of social justice. For Nagel, this derives from three main premises. The first two of these, which he makes explicit, are that social justice requires, as an enabling condition, a centralized government with institutions that are capable of exercising coercive authority and that centralized governments of this kind are exclusive to unified sovereign nation states. The third premise, which is implicit in his argument, is that a centralized government within a unified world super-state is neither possible nor desirable in the foreseeable future.

In making his argument, Nagel acknowledges the existence of moral commitments that give rise to aspirations for global justice, and he is sympathetic to these. He also acknowledges that sovereign states can subordinate limited aspects of their sovereignty to international agreements and mechanisms that enable weak forms of global governance rather than a viable global government. But he argues that neither of these factors, even acting in concert, provides the coercive power of a unified global government that is ultimately needed to ensure global conditions of social justice. Elaborating on this theme, he writes,

107 Thomas Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2005).

Every state has the boundaries and population it has for all sorts of accidental and historical reasons; but given that it exercises sovereign power over its citizens and in their name, those citizens have a duty of justice toward one another through the legal, social, and economic institutions that sovereign power makes possible. This duty is *sui generis*, and is not owed to everyone in the world, nor is it an indirect consequence of any other duty that may be owed to everyone in the world, such as a duty of humanity. Justice is something we owe through our shared institutions only to those with whom we stand in a strong political relation. It is, in the standard terminology, an *associative* obligation.¹⁰⁸

In political philosophy, the concept of an associative obligation has been used to describe political obligations that are enforceable within a polity or a state, as distinct from unenforceable moral obligations to humanity as a whole that might be felt or rationalized but cannot be enforced.¹⁰⁹ The concept is premised on the existence of a social contract among members of a polity, supported by mutual identification of those members. The latter is presumably needed to foster compliance with the social contract and to foster consent to its enforcement mechanisms.

However, even within many existing liberal states, such conditions can be very weak. Consider, for instance, a heterogeneous polity like the United States. Mutual identification across socially constructed lines of race, class, and region is weak at best, and nonexistent for many, on a phenomenological level. Likewise, the American social contract has never fully included many social groups, and to the extent it has in principle, enforcement mechanisms have been inadequate at best, profoundly discriminatory at worst. Therefore, it is doubtful that the kind of associative obligation Nagel alludes to has ever adequately developed in the U.S. (and other internally diverse nation states). This arguably explains, in part, the social Darwinist logic that tends to inform U.S. domestic politics and policies. According to Nagel's logic, if social justice is partly contingent on a phenomenologically rooted sense of associative obligation, then should struggles for social justice be abandoned in the U.S. (and in other internally diverse countries) due to the absence of this sense? Many social justice advocates would argue that it is precisely where such associative obligations are weakest

108 Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice," 121.

109 Refer, for instance, to John Horton, *Political Obligation* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

that the struggle becomes most important. Indeed, the struggle can be understood partly in terms of an effort to deepen the sense of associative obligation across a nation's diversity, transform the social contract accordingly, and develop corresponding enforcement mechanisms.

Likewise, consider the much stronger associative obligations that emerged in historically homogeneous polities such as those of Scandinavia. Such obligations, rooted in phenomenologically experienced forms of mutual ethnic identification, help explain — in concert with decades of movement organizing — the establishment of the Nordic economic model with its relatively strong commitment to distributive justice. However, as recent immigration patterns have begun to diversify these polities, the Nordic social contract is being tested, and it is not yet clear whether, or how, commitments to distributive justice will survive these tests. To the extent that a sense of associative obligation in Nordic polities may now be weakening, should struggles for social justice be abandoned, in accordance with Nagel's logic? On the contrary, such struggles will arguably become more important. And again, these struggles will involve, in part, efforts to deepen the sense of associative obligation across the polity's increasing diversity, expand the social contract in ways that value such diversity, and refine enforcement mechanisms so they respect that diversity.

Similarly, across the planet's heterogeneous human population, taken as a whole, where a sense of associative obligation is still weak, any global social contract is still nascent at best, and limited enforcement mechanisms tend to discriminate in favor of the most powerful states and other elite actors, should these factors lead us to abandon transnational struggles for social justice? On the contrary, such struggles will arguably become more important in the coming decades as our growing social, economic, and ecological interdependence causes us to recognize that we have become a *de facto* global polity — a polity in need of a global sense of associative obligation, an inclusive social contract, and just enforcement mechanisms.

Cynics today may dismiss the latter as impossible. But within their respective historical contexts, cynics have generally dismissed transformative movements for social justice as impossible. Such cynicism was widely expressed in the face of struggles to abolish slavery, struggles to achieve universal suffrage, struggles for post-colonial independence,

and every other worthwhile modern struggle. Furthermore, such dismissals have always come most easily from positions of historical privilege. Yet cynical objections voiced from privileged positions are rarely a good gauge of what is possible or desirable through committed multi-generational struggle.

In contrast, ever-expanding movements of concerned citizens are mobilizing widely for global justice. These movements are populated in large part by young generations who have grown up within globalized flows of culture and communication that have brought them into close and appreciative contact with distant others. These movements are comprised in part of those who have been marginalized by the prevailing global (dis)order. Yet such movements also include growing numbers drawn from privileged backgrounds whose awakening sense of justice, combined with expanded opportunities to learn about the conditions of distant others, enable them to see beyond the limited horizons of their own privilege. Furthermore, across these global movements, one can discern an emerging sense of associative obligation rooted in phenomenologically thick forms of mutual identification with distant others — or rooted in a deepening consciousness of the oneness of humanity. How else can one explain the sacrifices of time, energy, material comforts, and, in some cases, bodily safety that many movement protagonists are willing to make on behalf of distant others they've never even met?

Of course, global commitments to the well-being of distant others should not distract from local commitments to the well-being of proximate others. Such commitments can and should be complementary, not mutually exclusive. But the increasing globalization of our sphere of moral commitment is a significant late-modern development.

Consistent with this development, growing numbers of political philosophers and social theorists have begun articulating arguments for global justice. Some of these arguments challenge Rawls's assertion that global disparities are largely attributable to the cultural character of nations and his corresponding conclusion that global redistributive justice therefore cannot be justified.¹¹⁰ What Rawls fails to adequately

110 As Rawls wrote, "I believe that the causes of the wealth of a people and the forms it takes lie in their political culture and in the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions that support the basic structure of their political and social institutions, as

recognize, in this regard, is how material disparities and the cultural character of many nations have both been shaped by the legacies of colonialism and imperialism by the extractive system of global capitalism that has been constructed on those legacies and by the political machinations of powerful nations competing to continually shape the global order in their own interests. In this context, attributing disparities among nations primarily to their cultural character is reductive and ahistorical.

There is little doubt, of course, that psychological and cultural factors can inhibit the development of individual and collective capacities. The problem with the preceding argument arises when those factors are understood as intrinsic and when the external forces that have shaped those factors are ignored. The most obvious examples of the latter include historical traumas inflicted on entire social groups or populations through enslavement, war, and cultural genocide.¹¹¹ Less obvious examples can be seen in the way hegemonic states have targeted populations with divide and conquer strategies, installed clientelist rulers, and incentivized corruption in the service of extractive aims.¹¹² Moreover, political strategies of this kind have been psychologically reinforced by globally exported systems of academic discourse and popular media representations that can contribute to self-stigmatization and other harmful attitudes in susceptible populations.¹¹³

well as in the industriousness and cooperative talents of its members ... The crucial elements that make the difference are the political culture, the political virtues and civic society of the country." *The Law of Peoples*, 108.

- 111 Gilda Graff, "The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and Its Aftereffects: The Question of Reparations," *Journal of Psychohistory* 44, no. 4 (2017); Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, "The Intergenerational Effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the Concept of Historical Trauma," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51, no. 3 (2014); Linda O'Neill et al., "Hidden Burdens: a Review of Intergenerational, Historical and Complex Trauma, Implications for Indigenous Families," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 11, no. 2 (2018); Melissa Weinberg and Robert Cummins, "Intergenerational Effects of the Holocaust: Subjective Well-Being in the Offspring of Survivors," *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 11, no. 2 (2013); Cindy Sangalang and Cindy Vang, "Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 19, no. 3 (2017).
- 112 Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).
- 113 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*; Syed Hussein Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and*

Furthermore, factors that inhibit the development of nations are not merely part of our past. The current global order continues to be structured in ways that privilege the interests and wellbeing of some nations at the expense of others. Two well-documented examples should suffice to illustrate this.

First, advocates for global justice have pointed to the intellectual property framework, constructed by Western elites, that now dominates much of the planet.¹¹⁴ This framework is an extension of elite efforts to enclose the commons that began in late feudal Europe with the exclusion of the peasant classes from accessing natural resources on what were previously considered public lands. These processes expanded globally through the colonization of other continents and the exclusion of their Indigenous inhabitants from their own historical lands and from accessing the bounties of their natural environments. Over the past century, these same processes have been steadily enclosing an ever-expanding range of inherited natural resources, cultural resources, folk arts, and intellectual property — including natural water sources upon which entire populations depend, pharmacopeia knowledge developed over millennia by Indigenous tribes, crops domesticated over millennia by peasant farmers, the airwaves used for broadcasting and telecommunication, and even the genetic codes that constitute life itself. Though there is a valid need to ensure that certain forms of creative and intellectual labor are rewarded through limited duration copyrights and patents, the existing regime of intellectual property law has been extended beyond reasonable limits and is being aggressively exploited in ways that further concentrate wealth among global elites while marginalizing the masses of humanity from the fruits of their own labors.

Similarly, advocates for global justice have pointed to the system of international debt and finance that has been constructed to ensure that wealth can continue to be extracted from previously colonized nations and to coerce those previously colonized nations into abiding by the rules

Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

114 Patrick Brantlinger, *Barbed Wire: Capitalism and the Enclosure of the Commons* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Susan Buck and Elinor Ostrom, *The Global Commons* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1998); Madhavi Sunder, *From Goods to a Good Life: Intellectual Property and Global Justice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

of a global order constructed by the West.¹¹⁵ This system was constructed after the wealth and natural resources of such nations were pillaged by Western powers, their traditional systems of governance undermined by those same powers, and their ensuing post-colonial engagement with the global economy unfolded under conditions of extreme disadvantage. In an egregious example of this, the post-apartheid government of South Africa was saddled with tens of billions of U.S. dollars in odious foreign debt that was borrowed by the prior apartheid government to prop up its apartheid system — and the post-apartheid regime is still paying off this debt.¹¹⁶ In an even more egregious example, following the Haitian revolution that ended in 1804, by which the enslaved peoples of Haiti liberated themselves from French colonial rule and formed one of the first free democratic nation states of the modern world, France coercively imposed a debt on Haiti equivalent to tens of billions of U.S. dollars today, for Haiti to repay the value of the slaves and plantations lost to colonial elites.¹¹⁷ This debt took over a century for Haiti to pay off, in part because of the international isolation Haiti was subjected to by the United States and other Western powers — an isolation that was born initially out of fears that the Haitian revolution would inspire rebellions against slavery in other countries.

Beyond these two examples, advocates for global justice have pointed out that global inequities continue to be perpetuated through trade treaties, tariffs, antidumping laws, agricultural subsidies, and many other measures, the impacts of which have been well documented.¹¹⁸

115 Robert Howse, *The Concept of Odious Debt in Public International Law*, Discussion Papers, No. 185 (Geneva: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, July 2007); Tom Ginsburg and Thomas Ulen, "Odious Debt, Odious Credit, Economic Development, and Democratization," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 70 (2007); Christiana Ochoa, "From Odious Debt to Odious Finance: Avoiding the Externalities of a Functional Odious Debt Doctrine," *Harvard International Law Journal* 49, no. 1 (2008); Martin Dent and Bill Peters, *The Crisis of Poverty and Debt in the Third World* (New York: Routledge, 2018); John Perkins, *The New Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016).

116 Jeff Rudin, "Challenging Apartheid's Foreign Debt," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and The Middle East* 18 (1998).

117 Catherine Porter et al., "The Root of Haiti's Misery: Reparations to Enslavers," *The New York Times* (20 May 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>; Lazaro Gamio et al., "The Ransom: Haiti's Lost Billions," *The New York Times* (20 May 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/20/world/americas/enslaved-haiti-debt-timeline.html>

118 Gillian Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

When these historical and contemporary forces are recognized, the moral obligation for some form of global reparative justice among nation states — including some form of redistributive justice — should become evident to all but the most committed social Darwinists who continue to view five centuries of coercive Western hegemony as the manifest destiny of a superior civilization. Thus, the moral obligation to pursue global justice arises not from a simple sense of compassion or charity, but from recognition of the ways some nations bear historical and ongoing responsibility for the gross disparities we see within the global community of nations, combined with recognition that in an age of increasing global interdependence, the wellbeing of any given nation is inextricably bound up with the wellbeing of all nations.¹¹⁹ These claims do not negate the simultaneous need for reforms, capacity building, anti-corruption measures, and so forth, within less prosperous nations. Advancement on all fronts is undoubtedly needed.

Having considered the limits of methodological nationalism, followed by arguments for the necessity of pursuing social justice on a global scale, we can now turn to ways the latter is being conceptualized. For the purpose of this discussion, we will refer to these conceptions in terms of global justice. Our use of this term designates something much broader than the pursuit of global criminal justice through nascent institutions such as the International Criminal Court — important as this is. Global social justice extends to all of the basic structures and arrangements of our de facto global order.

The discourse on global justice thus encompasses (but is not limited to) concerns about global distributions of economic resources, opportunities, and power; human rights, including social and economic rights; the extraction and movement of natural resources across borders

2009); Catherine Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nicole Hassoun, *Globalization and Global Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ayelet Banai, Miriam Ronzoni, and Christian Schemmel, eds., *Social Justice, Global Dynamics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

119 Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*; Richard Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Thomas Pogge and Keith Morton, eds., *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008); Lucas Chancel, Cornelia Mohren, Rowaida Moshref, Moritz Odersky, Thomas Piketty, and Anmol Somanchi, *The Global Justice Report: A Plan for Equality & Prosperity Within Planetary Boundaries*, World Inequality Lab (2026) <https://globaljusticeproject.wid.world>.

and associated impacts on populations; tax havens and transnational debt obligations; transnational currency speculation and financial transactions; intellectual property rights and access to knowledge; flows of information, media, and representations; the movements of populations; peace keeping, humanitarian interventions, and genocide prevention; intergenerational stewardship of migratory species, bioregional habitats, and the climate itself; the disproportionate impacts of health pandemics; and the operation of multinational corporations.

These and other global justice concerns rest on the same broad convictions, explored earlier, that every human life has equal moral worth, that every person should thus have opportunities to develop their latent capacities to contribute to the betterment of humanity, and that basic social structures should be arranged to maximize these opportunities.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the discourse on global justice is increasingly attentive to the ways all individuals are embedded within communities, the ways communities as a whole can be afforded or denied opportunities, and the need for social structures to ensure justice at this level as well.¹²¹ The nation state is therefore not the primary unit of analysis in the discourse on global justice. Rather, the primary units of analyses are individuals and communities. The nation state is only one form of community.

In this regard, global justice — not merely between aggrieved states and the narrow interests they sometimes represent, but for the

120 Paul Nnodim, *Beyond Justice as Fairness: Rethinking Rawls from a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Lexington Books, 2020); Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*; Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*; Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton, eds., *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008); Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*; Andrea Sangiovanni, "On the Relation Between Moral and Distributive Equality," in *Cosmopolitanism versus Non-Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Gillian Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

121 Uchenna Okeja, ed., *African Philosophy and Global Justice* (London: Routledge, 2019); Eric Larson, *Grounding Global Justice: Race, Class, and Grassroots Globalism in the United States and Mexico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023); Duncan Bell, ed., *Empire, Race and Global Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Iris Marion Young, "Self-Determination and Global Democracy: A Critique of Liberal Nationalism," *Nomos – Designing Democratic Institutions* 42 (2000); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Thaddeus Metz, "Replacing Development: An Afro-communal Approach to Global Justice," *Philosophical Papers* 46, no. 1 (2017); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

full diversity of individuals and communities that comprise humanity — is increasingly viewed as a moral imperative that derives from our growing interconnectedness and interdependence on this planet.¹²² This fundamental moral imperative supports the derivative imperative to construct appropriate institutions of global governance as one of the many requisites of global justice.¹²³ And it is from this fundamental moral imperative that some of the essential features of a system of global governance can also be derived. Thus, the argument for global justice precedes, rather than follows from, the relative presence or absence of effective institutions of global governance.

Furthermore, though methodological nationalists tend to argue that social justice is only enforceable within the nation state, some advocates for global justice argue the opposite: achieving social justice within nation states will only become fully possible through the development of an effective system of global governance because in the absence of such a system, national governments are incapable of achieving it within their borders. Consider, in this regard, the problem of capital flight in a globalized economy. When states construct progressive systems of taxation to support various social justice aims, the wealthiest segments of society often move their wealth to tax havens. And sometimes they physically move their residences, businesses, and capital investments to states with more regressive tax systems. Thus, a global race to the bottom is encouraged with tax systems. In the absence of some globally coordinated system of progressive taxation, it is not possible to solve this

122 David Miller, *Nationalism and Global Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Pogge and Horton, *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*; Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*; Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*; Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*; Gillian Brock and Darrel Moellendorf, eds., *Current Debates in Global Justice* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2005); Nicole Hassoun, *Globalization and Global Justice: Shrinking Distance, Expanding Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

123 Augusto Lopez-Claros, Arthur L. Dahl, and Maja Groff, *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Christian Barry and Thomas Pogge, eds., *Global Institutions and Responsibilities: Achieving Global Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Kok-Chor Tan, *Justice, Institutions, & Luck: The Site, Ground, and Scope of Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

problem.¹²⁴ Similar problems arise in the absence of effective systems for addressing the myriad other social concerns that arise in a globalized economy, from uneven labor standards to the disproportionate impacts of climate change.¹²⁵ Advocates for global justice therefore point out that the pursuit of social justice within nation states depends, in part, on the development of effective systems of global governance because the fetishization of the nation state and the global anarchy that results from it directly undermine this pursuit.

Some advocates for global justice also argue that, following the history of colonialism and then the post-colonial construction of an extractive neo-liberal global economy dominated by a small number of hegemonic powers, social justice cannot be achieved within historically exploited nations or across the community of nations in the absence of some global process of transitional justice that addresses the macro-historical causes of today's global inequities.¹²⁶ In this context, transitional justice, alluded to earlier in this chapter, refers to processes that seek to address macro-historical injustices committed against entire populations, often over many generations. Examples include injustices committed against Indigenous peoples by settler-colonial nations, or injustices committed against peoples enslaved by many of those same nations, or injustices committed against ethnic or religious minorities through genocidal

124 Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*; Hillel Steiner, "Just Taxation and International Redistribution," in *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008); Peter Dietsch, "Tax Competition and its Effects on Domestic and Global Justice," in *Social Justice, Global Dynamics*, ed. Ayelet Banai, Miriam Ronzoni, and Christian Schemmel (New York: Routledge, 2011); Thomas Pogge, *Global Tax Fairness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

125 Yossi Dahan, Hanna Lerner, and Faina Milman-Sivan, eds., *Global Justice and International Labour Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Mary Rawlinson, Wim Vandekerckhove, and Ronald Commers, eds., *Labor and Global Justice* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2014); Simon Caney, "Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change," in *The Global Justice Reader*, ed. Thom Brooks (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Eric Posner David Weisbach, *Climate Change Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jeremy Moss, *Climate Change and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015).

126 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics*; Banai, Ronzoni, and Schemmel, *Social Justice, Global Dynamics*; Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*; Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*; Daniel Butt, *Rectifying International Injustice: Principles of Compensation and Restitution Between Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kok-Chor Tan, "Colonialism, Reparations, and Global Justice," in *Reparations: Interdisciplinary Inquiries*, ed. Jon Miller and Rahul Kumar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

violence. Transitional justice processes encompass a wide range of approaches, from tribunals focused on crimes against humanity to truth and reconciliation commissions to material reparations and a wide range of other corrective social or economic measures.

In the absence of such processes, on a macro-historical scale, many nations will continue to suffer under the weight of profound social and economic disadvantages accrued over generations of exploitation and manipulation. Though any transitional processes of this kind will be enormously complex, and though process prescriptions are debated, and though any such prospects still seem distant, it is hard to deny their relevance to any serious consideration of social justice in the modern world.

A related concern is creating conditions that support the autonomy of nations to determine the path of their own development within a global pluriverse that respects cultural differences and values diversity as a source of global flourishing.¹²⁷ This is not unlike movements for greater self-determination within nation states — especially among Indigenous communities. As the Zapatistas declared, “In the world of the powerful there is no space for anyone but themselves and their servants. In the world we want everyone fits. In the world we want many worlds to fit.”¹²⁸ This is the pluriverse.

These concerns, whether raised in a national or global context, raise complex questions about cultural purity, cultural reproduction, culturally sanctioned injustices, and cultural change.¹²⁹ If cultures have

127 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Amaya Querejazu, “Encountering the Pluriverse: Looking for Alternatives in Other Worlds,” *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 59, no. 2 (2016); Martin Savransky, *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds: Politics of the Pluriverse* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

128 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, *Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (1 January 1996), <https://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Fourth-Declaration-of-the-Lacandona-Jungle.pdf>

129 Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in *Modernity and Its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1992); Wani Tombe Lako, “Gender Difference Masquerading as a Tool for Women Oppression in Cultural Discourse,” *The Ahfad Journal: Women and Change* 21, no. 1 (2004).

been cross-fertilizing and hybridizing for millennia and there has never been such a thing as a “pure” or entirely “isolated” culture, what does cultural self-determination mean? Within a culture, who determines which cultural elements get reproduced across generations, and what motivates such determinations? From a social justice standpoint, it is likely that all cultures have inherited different social pathologies from the past, which necessitate different forms of cultural change. What are the implications for cultural self-determination? For instance, within patriarchal cultures where men have a disproportionate degree of power over the means of cultural reproduction, should they have the autonomy to continue subordinating the rights of women? If not, should such autonomy be limited by some supra-national system? Or should all processes of cultural change be advanced only from within the culture, by its own members? If the latter, what rights should be accorded to those who seek to radically reform aspects of their own culture in the name of social justice? Furthermore, what social justice obligations rest on any given cultural group in relation to neighboring cultural groups or to other groups with overlapping geographies? In this regard, if one extrapolates from liberal philosophies, the principle that the autonomy of any given cultural group extends only up to the point of doing no harm to other groups, how would the question of harm be adjudicated and by whom? And what about the question of collective self-harm?

Despite the complexity of these questions, it is increasingly accepted in the discourse on global justice — at least in principle — that partially distinct cultural groups exist, and social justice requires some degree of cultural self-determination in order for such groups to flourish. This is especially the case for Indigenous populations and other minoritized groups hoping to preserve valuable aspects of their cultural heritage in the face of powerful homogenizing forces. In this regard, humanity, as a whole, will undoubtedly be enriched by efforts to foster conditions that enable and protect some forms of cultural self-determination — provided such self-determination includes the ability of movements within such populations to pursue cultural change in accord with normative principles that promote human flourishing.

The discourse on global justice is thus increasingly accepting the broad vision of some kind of pluriverse that respects cultural differences and values diversity. At the same time, the concept of a pluriverse, and

the concept of global justice itself, is premised on an implicit recognition of the oneness of humanity. Why should one cultural group care about the ability of another to flourish in the absence of some sense of their shared humanity? In this regard, our shared humanity — or our oneness — does not equate with homogeneity or uniformity. On the contrary, diversity is a requisite of organic oneness — much like the diverse cells and organs of a complex organism, which make possible the flourishing of its constituent members. The question that remains open, in this regard, is how we can best understand and enact the relationship between our shared human identity and the many other particular identities our diversity gives rise to.

This question brings us back to the discussion on egoism and othering, as well as altruism and inclusion, in Chapter 1. As previously noted, all of these potentialities are innate, they all begin to manifest themselves in our first few years of life, and they interact in complex ways. More specifically, the construction of in-group and out-group distinctions tends to give rise to cooperation, trust, and empathy within in-groups, yet it tends to breed competition, suspicion, and antipathy in relation to out-groups.

Not surprisingly, pessimistic observers of human nature often conclude that the tendencies toward egoism and othering, along with the competition, suspicion, and antipathy they give rise to, are all so deeply ingrained in human nature that we can never overcome them. Yet, here again, a growing body of empirical evidence suggests how we might overcome them. A series of highly respected empirical studies on expressions of altruism during the holocaust and in other related contexts, undertaken by Kristen Monroe, found that altruism can transcend in-group versus out-group distinctions when it arises from a deeply internalized consciousness of the oneness with humanity. Elaborating on this finding, she wrote:

World views constitute extremely powerful influences on altruism, with the critical factor being the altruist's perception of self in relation to others. But contrary to earlier findings, this perception was not framed in terms of group ties. Indeed, [the cases of altruism examined in this study were] not a product of the altruist's perceptions of others, in terms of the others' particular group or their individual characteristics or likeability; nor was it a reflection of the altruist's views on human nature or beliefs in a just world. Rather, it is a reflection of the perceived relationship

between the altruist and *all* other human beings. Altruists share a view of the world in which all people are one. This world view appears to bond them to all humanity in an affective manner that encourages altruistic treatment.¹³⁰

This sense of shared human identity, Monroe found, gives rise to the altruistic treatment of others in part by limiting the behavioral options the altruist perceives — not just morally but cognitively. When consciousness of the oneness of humanity and the altruistic values associated with this become integral to one's core sense of self, it is difficult to act against this consciousness — by ignoring, for instance, the threat of immediate harm to others — without damaging one's sense of self. Thus, when considering the phenomenon of selective altruism alluded to above, it is not enough to recognize that people naturally construct in-group and out-group distinctions that can, in turn, shape egoistic and altruistic behaviors. What is equally significant is how those distinctions are understood by those who perceive them. For the altruists Monroe studied, such distinctions were meaningful only as subordinate categories of difference within a superordinate perception of a shared humanity. The latter perception, moreover, was experienced as phenomenologically robust and morally compelling.¹³¹

In follow-up studies, Monroe elaborates another significant factor that helps explain why some people exhibit the moral courage to act altruistically to prevent harm to “the other” even in the face of powerful social forces proscribing such action. Such altruists tend to have a strong sense of self-efficacy and historical agency, in contrast to passive bystanders who tend to have a sense of learned helplessness and historical fatalism. Altruism, in this sense, arises from a consciousness of the oneness of humanity combined with the perception that one can be a protagonist of pro-social change.¹³² Thus, the challenge now facing

130 Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 198.

131 Kristen Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice During the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*.

132 Kristen Monroe, *Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide: Identity and Moral Choice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Kristen Monroe, *When Conscience Calls: Moral Courage in Times of Confusion and Despair* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

humanity, in this regard, is how to foster — purposefully, systematically, and universally — a consciousness of the oneness of humanity combined with a sense of historical agency.

Despite the compelling evidence Monroe offers in support of her conclusions, it is still widely assumed that all human identities are formed oppositionally. According to this assumption, a global identity is impossible because there is no “other” against which a globally inclusive identity can set itself. Thus, there can be no “us” unless there is also a “them.” But this argument is not only undermined by empirical evidence such as Monroe’s. As Arash Abizadeh explains, the argument is also logically unsound. The view that human identities must be particularist, exclusive, or oppositional traces back from Rousseau and Hegel to more contemporary thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Chantal Mouffe. The view derives from a theory of individual ego formation in which the individual ego or self requires mutual recognition by an external other in order to gain a sense of self-differentiation, self-consciousness, and self-worth. Skeptics of an inclusive global identity tacitly assume that this theory, which was developed to explain processes of individual identity formation, applies equally to processes of collective identity formation. However, even if we assume that this theory is valid with respect to the differentiation of individual egos, there is no reason to believe it explains or delimits all processes of collective identity formation. As Abizadeh puts it,

Individual socialization requires interaction with external others. But socializing an individual to identify with a collective identity could, rather obviously, simply occur through social interaction with individuals who also identify with it... In other words, the arguments in defense of the particularist thesis (that only collectivities with an external other can be the basis for identity) suffer from a fallacy of composition... The argument suffers from not being attentive to the distinction between individual and collective identity. It fails to distinguish between an “other” external to the collectivity to which I belong and other individual members of the collectivity to which I belong.¹³³

Stated simply, even if we agree that there can be no “I” unless there is a “them,” it does not follow that there can be no “us” unless there is a “them.” Furthermore, even if we assume collective identities must

¹³³ Arash Abizadeh, “Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity,” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005), 48.

derive from difference, this still does not exclude the possibility of a global human identity. As Abizadeh again explains,

To be sure, a collective identity might be formed in contrast to, or even in combat with, an actually existing external other excluded from its membership. But it might also be constructed on the basis of difference from hypothetical values and the imagined collective identities centered on them, or on the basis of difference from the values of a past historical identity from which one wishes to mark one's distance... humanity's own past provides a rich and terrifying repository in contrast to which cosmopolitan identity could constitute its "difference."¹³⁴

Thus, the argument that all human identities are formed oppositionally and that a global human identity is impossible is not logically defensible. And the argument is empirically refuted by the sense of common humanity Monroe found among all of the altruists she studied, who share a view of the world in which all people are one. The argument is also rebutted by the experience of communities such as the worldwide Bahá'í community, which is founded upon an explicit commitment to the oneness of humanity and which understands itself — as Abizadeh theorizes above — as an open and inclusive community constituted on the basis of difference from historically immature values and antagonisms that it seeks to mature beyond.¹³⁵

It is also worth noting that an expanding program of research has emerged around the psychological construct identification with all humanity, inspired partly by Monroe's research. This growing body of research offers further empirical evidence that all-inclusive forms of identification exist, they increase altruism and reduce prejudice across social differences and across geographical distances, they can be proactively fostered, and they are widely viewed as a sign of moral maturity.¹³⁶ Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that identification with

134 Abizadeh, "Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity," 58.

135 David Palmer and Temily Tavangar, "The Bahá'í Faith and Covenantal Pluralism: Promoting Oneness, Respecting Difference," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19 (2021); Temily Tavangar, "From Cosmopolitan Convergences to Situated Religious Cosmopolitanism: The Early Spread of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore and Malaya (1950–1975)," *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 23, no. 3 (2023).

136 See, for example, Sam McFarland, Derek Brown, and Matthew Webb, "Identification With All Humanity as a Moral Concept and Psychological Construct," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (2013); Sam McFarland, Matthew Webb,

all humanity can even be felt in ways that take future generations into account.¹³⁷ A sense of oneness with humanity can thus have social, spatial, and temporal dimensions.

In this regard, a deeply felt sense of oneness with humanity does not exclude the possibility of countless nested identities that derive from the rich diversity that characterizes humanity. Any given individual holds multiple, intersecting, non-exclusive, partial identities based on things like gender, age, family, ethnicity, nationality, religious beliefs, occupation, socio-economic status, personal interests, and so forth. None of these partial identities necessarily precludes a sense of oneness with humanity or a commitment to act as a responsible citizen of the world. A global “we” can accommodate multiple secondary distinctions between “us” and “them” when those distinctions are not understood in a hostile or adversarial manner. Moreover, it only takes one individual who identifies in this way and acts accordingly to disprove the hypothesis referred to above that all human identities are necessarily exclusive or oppositional. And such individuals abound.

Furthermore, as Shahrzad Sabet argues, an overarching primary identity based on our shared humanity is the only way to harmonize and secure our many particular secondary identities. In this regard, Sabet notes that every particular identity is (a) culturally and historically contingent and thus inherently unstable and insecure, and (b) exclusive. The combination of these factors can give rise to perennial and ever-shifting forms of contestation over who belongs and who does not belong within any particular identity group (e.g., who is White enough, Black enough, or Indigenous enough; who is American enough, Hutu enough, or Japanese enough; who is Christian enough, Muslim enough, or Hindu enough). Such contestation leads to perpetual insecurities that become manifest in identity-based factionalization, conflict, and violence. This

and Derek Brown, “All Humanity Is My Ingroup: A Measure and Studies of Identification With All Humanity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 5 (2012); Gerhard Reese, Jutta Proch, and Christine Finn, “Identification With All Humanity: The Role of Self-definition and Self-investment,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 45 (2015); Yi Feng et al., “The Identification With All Humanity (IWAH) Scale: Its Psychometric Properties and Associations with Help-seeking During COVID-19,” *Current Psychology* 42 (2022).

137 Stylianos Syropoulos et al., “Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence: The Psychology of Feeling (Equal) Intergenerational Concern for All Future Generations,” *Social Psychology Bulletin* (2025), 800.

undermines our ability to work together toward globally shared ends. Only an overarching human identity offers the non-contingent sense of belonging and security that enables diverse particular identities to flourish.¹³⁸

We can thus appreciate the need to foster the robust, affectively experienced, and morally compelling sense of a shared humanity that Kristen Monroe documented among altruists. Monroe's research suggests this sense of oneness can become expressed as a moral reflex, in a manner that is consistent with the Aristotelian theory of virtue ethics. Joshua Greene, director of Harvard University's Moral Cognition Lab, has also found that our instinct toward othering can also be overcome through deliberative reasoning.¹³⁹ It thus appears we have multiple means of subordinating the instinct toward othering to a commitment to our shared humanity.

It is important to recognize that there is nothing natural or inevitable about identification with a nation state. Nationality is a socially constructed form of identification that is a product of Western modernity. It is, in the words of Benedict Anderson, an "imagined community" made possible through the rise of print capitalism, the spread of books printed in shared vernacular languages, and other historically specific factors.¹⁴⁰ Yet, as Charles Carnegie subsequently argues, "as both model and practice, nationalism and the nation-state are fraught with contradictions," such as the presumption of unstable forms of ethnic or normative homogeneity that set up internal oppositions within the nation state and external oppositions among the community of nation states.¹⁴¹ Thus, in *Postnationalism Prefigured*, Carnegie concurs with Stuart Hall's assertion that "identity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed."¹⁴² And he invites us to take seriously the

138 Shahrzad Sabet, "The Crisis of Identity," in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record Volume XXXV, 2006-2021*, ed. Naisohn Arfai and Robert Weinberg (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center Publications, 2023).

139 Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

140 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

141 Charles Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 2.

142 Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*, 10.

possibility—indeed the necessity—of a “world community imagined.”¹⁴³

If, as the preceding logic and evidence suggests, our shared humanity can serve as the basis of a primary overarching identity that is phenomenologically and rationally meaningful, then it is possible to develop the sense of associative obligation that political philosophers assume would be needed for political obligations to become enforceable within a global polity (as previously discussed).¹⁴⁴ Associative obligation, in this sense, refers to those relational duties that derive from a shared sense of belonging. Not surprisingly, a growing number of voices are now advocating the construction of a system of democratic global governance, grounded in a global sense of associative obligation, as an inescapable necessity of human existence in the twenty-first century.¹⁴⁵

Such proposals clearly transcend the methodological nationalism that informed the design of the United Nations and its stillborn predecessor, the League of Nations. The United Nations was constructed around the interests and agendas of national governments, and its collective security functions were, from the outset, subordinated to the veto power of five powerful nations after World War II. This dysfunctional arrangement has proven incapable of coordinating humanity’s response to any of the existential threats we now face and has handicapped the pursuit of global justice. Moving beyond this dysfunctional arrangement may require the construction of a system of democratic global governance that more directly represents the will and promotes the wellbeing of the people (rather than the nations) of the world. Though national governments might also play some role within such a system, they need not constitute its primary actors — even as local governments do not constitute the primary actors in national systems of democratic governance. Though a more detailed discussion of the potential architecture of a system of global governance is beyond the scope of this book, suffice it to say that movement in this direction is increasingly recognized as a condition

143 Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*, 177–99.

144 Horton, *Political Obligation*; Nagel, “The Problem of Global Justice.”

145 Lopez-Claros, Dahl, and Groff, *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century*; Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*; Thomas G. Weiss and Ramesh Thakur, *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Richard Falk and Augusto Lopez-Claros, eds., *Global Governance and International Cooperation: Managing Global Catastrophic Risks in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

that is relevant to movements for global justice.

Finally, one more theme warrants attention in any discussion of global justice. Though global justice is generally understood in spatial terms, it also has a temporal dimension. That is, the discourse on global justice tends not only to be concerned about social justice for all those who are currently living on the planet, wherever they happen to have been born. It also tends to be concerned about generations to come, who will inherit the planet we leave them — including its social and ecological conditions. In effect, we live in a global intergenerational polity to which our associative obligations must ultimately be extended. Intergenerational justice can thus be understood as an essential concern of many globally oriented thinkers.¹⁴⁶

146 Axel Gosseries and Lukas Meyer, eds., *Intergenerational Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Janna Thompson, *Intergenerational Justice: Rights and Responsibilities in an Intergenerational Polity* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Christine Winter, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice: Indigenous Philosophy, the Environment and Relationships* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Joerg Chet Tremmel, *A Theory of Intergenerational Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Tracey Sillington, *Climate Change and Intergenerational Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

3. Toward a Common Horizon

In Chapter 2, we traced how the modern concept of social justice evolved, and we explored various ways of conceptualizing it. Though our discussion was not exhaustive, we sought to illustrate significant currents of thought while also inviting further dialogue. As we previously noted, many such movements find it easier to articulate negative conceptions of social justice — or conceptions of the various injustices they seek to overcome. What has proven more elusive has been a shared positive conception of social justice — or a broad vision of the essential nature of the just social order we seek to construct.

In this chapter, we offer a positive conception of social justice derived from the preceding discussion. We offer this as a way to envision the common horizon — or the ultimate ends — toward which contemporary movements for social justice all appear to be oriented. This enables us, in the second part of this book, to consider how these ends might inform the means by which they are pursued.

An Expansive Conception of Contributive Justice

In the diverse perspectives explored in Chapter 2, we see coherence rather than contradiction. The explicit or implicit concern informing all these perspectives centers on the relationship between justice and contributions to the common weal. By focusing on this concern, it becomes possible to articulate a shared positive conception, which can be stated as follows:

Social justice can be understood as a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives. Some of these conditions may vary in different cultural contexts and historical moments. Nonetheless,

all such conditions can be understood as latent social possibilities that can be collectively discerned and acted upon, in any given cultural and historical context, in efforts to advance toward them.

This expansive conception of contributive justice enables us to envision a common horizon — or ultimate ends — toward which diverse movements for social justice all appear to be oriented. It offers a positive vision of social justice which accords with most people's intuitive understanding, discussed in Chapter 2, that the principle of justice is a means for encouraging people to align the exercise of their free will with the moral duty to contribute to the common weal. Most people also intuitively understand that, in order for everyone to contribute to the common weal, the conditions of their social existence must enable them to develop their latent capacities to contribute.

The desire to contribute to the betterment of society is also linked to universal human aspirations for meaning and purpose. In this regard, people long to know that they matter, and contributing is a primary way we matter.¹ In addition, contributing is not a zero-sum game. Fostering social conditions in which everyone can contribute to the common good leads to abundance, not scarcity. A focus on contributive justice thus enables us to transcend the logic of social contestation — or the view that one group's gain is another group's loss — which has been a primary source of backlash against movements for social justice.

Contributive justice thus recasts distributive commitments, even as it invites us to consider other relevant commitments. As the discussion in Chapter 2 illustrates, these include universal commitments to basic human rights; to the dignified representation and recognition of diverse peoples; to valuing and protecting cultural self-determination and epistemological diversity; to ensuring environmental justice; to fostering the capabilities needed to live a meaningful life; to cultivating those virtues and relational commitments on which collective flourishing depends; and to developing the moral and legal frameworks needed to support all of these commitments globally.

1 Jennifer Breheny Wallace, *Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose* (New York: Portfolio, 2026); Gordon Flett, *Mattering as a Core Need in Children and Adolescents: Theoretical, Clinical, and Research Perspectives* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2025); Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *The Mattering Instinct* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2026).

Of course, this does not constitute an exhaustive enumeration of all the requisite conditions for contributive justice. Rather, these examples are illustrative. And they are offered in an invitational spirit. Humanity does not yet know — cannot yet know — all of the conditions ultimately needed to support contributive justice. We cannot know this yet because we have not achieved this yet and because some of these conditions may be culturally and historically contingent.

Nonetheless, conceptualizing social justice in the terms articulated above invites us to systematically — and urgently — begin to learn our way forward toward a broad common horizon. It also mitigates the tendency to offer formulaic prescriptions for a just social architecture that are impossible to justify at this stage of humanity's collective development. Rather, this conception beckons us to advance on a path of learning, struggle, and sacrifice for a greater good.

This expansive conception of contributive justice is also compatible with and accommodates both secular and religious worldviews. It is silent on the question of whether we need to recognize the existence of foundational spiritual truths about human existence. Yet it accommodates this possibility, along with the possibility that some of those truths can be discerned in the originating impulses of the world's many spiritual or religious traditions. Thus, it implicitly casts questions about spiritual truths as worthy of further exploration on the path toward social justice. And it suggests that such questions can be tested by impartially examining the fruitfulness of authentic efforts to apply spiritual principles to the betterment of the human condition. In this regard, an expansive conception of contributive justice invites a posture of humility among people of all faiths and no faith, who can learn to collaborate on the path toward a common horizon, even if they are acting on different ontological assumptions.

But a word of caution is in order. John Rawls's influential theory of justice — insightful as it is — illustrates an intellectual tendency to assume that the design of a more just social order can be deduced by careful reasoning from first principles. Karl Marx — another insightful thinker — illustrates a similar prescriptive tendency, though his first principles were derived more from his theory of historical materialism than the principles of Western liberalism. And religious thinkers are not exempt from this intellectual tendency.

Such tendencies are ultimately naïve. First principles arguably

matter. But it is not possible to engineer, through the logical application of principles — however sound the principles might be — something as complex and dynamic as a just society. A just society is not a machine. It is more akin to an organic body, or an ecosystem, composed of diverse individuals, communities, and institutions, characterized by complex intersubjectivities, exerting complex forms of agency, and shaped generationally by ever-changing cultural and historical contexts.

In this sense, one could say a just society is not something that can be designed and engineered. It is something that must be organically cultivated and continuously tended. Attempts to engineer a just society are made further problematic by the fact that justice and injustice are not simply binary states. They are constellations of conditions that exist on a continuum. And the notion of an ideal architecture for social justice becomes even more problematic when one accounts for the possibility that equivalent expressions of social justice might become manifest in different ways within different cultural and historical milieus.

What is needed in the pursuit of social justice is thus a mode of continuous learning, capacity building, and advancement through collective action. In this sense, social justice is a horizon we may never fully reach. But we can continually learn our way toward it. Amartya Sen's comparative approach to the pursuit of social justice recognizes this. Yet Sen's work does not adequately engage the evolving discourse on *means* that we are focused on, and the question at its center: what are the most effective means by which growing movements of people can be mobilized and continuously advance toward the horizon of social justice?

This is the theme we turn to in the second part of this book. Before doing this, we want to acknowledge that the underlying concept of social justice our entire argument rests on is not without skeptics. Furthermore, the universality of our assertion that contributive justice is a common horizon toward which diverse movements for social justice implicitly or explicitly orient may be met with some skepticism. Finally, the social body metaphor we employ in our conception of contributive justice may also be met by some skepticism due to the way such metaphors can also be invoked for oppressive purposes. Each of these sources of skepticism warrant examination. However, examining them here would disrupt the arc of an argument that has already grown long and complex. We have therefore decided to address each of these sources of skepticism in Appendix A — so that we can turn now to the question of means.

PART II

THE MEANS: RADICAL CONSTRUCTIVE AGENCY

4. Violence and Nonviolence

The preceding discussion suggests that social justice can be understood as a set of conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives. Such conditions, we posit, are latent social potentialities that communities can collectively discern and work toward, though particular manifestations of those conditions can vary in different cultural contexts.

What forms of collective action constitute effective means to advance toward the ends of contributive justice? To what extent is the answer to this question context-dependent? Across diverse contexts, should collective action be guided by purely pragmatic, strategic, or instrumental considerations? Or are there universal normative principles that should also inform struggles for social justice, regardless of context?

For much of the last two centuries, movement activists have debated such questions, as have moral and political philosophers who share an underlying concern for social justice. These debates tend to rest on one shared premise: in the face of systemic injustices, we have a moral duty to act. Passivity is a moral failure. The question is how best to act.

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, we demonstrate how diverse attempts to answer these questions tend to pivot around two conceptual axes. The first of these, which is the focus of this chapter, is the axis of violence and nonviolence. This is a widely recognized axis of debate within the discourse on social change. The second of these, which is the focus of Chapter 5, is the axis of contention and construction. This is a less widely recognized, but equally significant, axis. For each of these axes, we delineate key arguments and considerations at play. In Chapter 6 we then examine prevailing conceptions of power and resistance that tend to inform commitments to violence or nonviolence, contention or

construction, in the pursuit of social justice.

Viewing the evolving discourse on means in this way offers a fresh perspective on learning across diverse movements for transformative change. From this perspective, it becomes possible to discern the role of radical constructive agency as a means of social transformation that needs to be taken much more seriously. In Chapter 7 we articulate the concept of radical constructive agency, explore its practical implications, and advance our central argument that at this transitional moment in history, contentious means of pursuing social change are reaching a point of diminishing returns and we now need to center radical constructive agency as a primary means.

Before proceeding with this analysis, we want to once again acknowledge that our examination of the discourse on means is not exhaustive. Nor is it strictly chronological. Rather, it is illustrative. In order to make it readable, we often trace the emergence and advancement of one theme before circling back to pick up another related theme. Through this approach we seek to illustrate the interplay of broad patterns and recurrent themes.

Also, with the exception of Chapter 8, most of the thinkers with whom we engage come from the Western tradition or are directly engaging it — either from subaltern positions within it or from decolonizing positions at its periphery. However, this seems an appropriate starting point, given our own familiarity and experience with the Western tradition and given its global impact and influence in the modern era. Understood in this way, our analysis invites further contributions from diverse cultural and historical perspectives. For instance, there are significant Indigenous traditions of nonviolence and Indigenous voices are needed to enrich this conversation.¹

Our analysis also invites further contributions from those who work within the process-oriented frameworks alluded to in Chapter 2, including transformative justice, transitional justice, restorative justice, and reparative justice. These frameworks, and the debates around them, intersect with the axes of violence/nonviolence and contention/construction in complex ways. However, if we tried to examine each of

1 See, for example, Leslie Sponsel and Thomas Gregor, eds., *The Anthropology of Peace and Nonviolence* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994); Robert Dentan, *Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

these frameworks, the debates around them, and the many ways they intersect with the two axes we are focused on, this book would become unwieldy. So, we invite others to explore these intersections in the future.

It is also important to note, given the largely secular orientation of Western discourse today, that traditions of religious thought have exerted a powerful influence in modern discourse on the means of social change.² In the Western world, such influences often trace back to Christian principles of nonviolence and corresponding efforts to apply those principles within movements for social justice. Historically, the most prominent of these include movements to abolish slavery, to emancipate women, to ameliorate poverty, to improve labor conditions, and to end war. In the nineteenth century, various “peace churches” — the Society of Friends, the Mennonites, the Brethren, the Doukhobors, and others — advanced nonviolent Christian doctrines that inspired many influential social reformers engaged in such movements, from William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass to Susan B. Anthony and Leo Tolstoy.

Outside the West, thinkers such as Mohandas Gandhi subsequently drew on diverse religious traditions — Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, among others — to formulate other spiritually grounded arguments for nonviolence. Elements of those arguments were taken up, in turn, by subsequent religious leaders such as the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Religious traditions of thought have thus contributed in direct, substantive, and sustained ways to modern arguments about violence and nonviolence within a global process of learning across diverse movements.³ Of course, secular thinkers have contributed equally to

2 Mark Kurlansky, *Nonviolence: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Modern Library, 2008); Ira Chernus, *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); Mohandas Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance: Satyagraha* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001); Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Christopher Queen, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Chaiwat Satha-Anand, *Nonviolence and Islamic Imperatives* (Sparsnas: Irene Publishing, 2017); Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003); Kurt Schock, “The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance,” *Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013).

3 Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of*

this discourse — both directly and indirectly — tracing back to the earliest modern period. One of those thinkers was the sixteenth-century Italian Niccolò Machiavelli, who came down on the other side of this argument. Our effort to trace key themes in the discourse on violent and nonviolent means will begin with his ideas about the nature and exercise of political power.

Underlying Conceptions of Power

In Machiavelli's remarkably influential book, *The Prince*, he notes that political order is often established when power is exercised ruthlessly to capture the state, impose order, and then maintain it. For such autocratic rulers, ethics are irrelevant. Domination is achieved through any means necessary. Violence, coercion, fear, and deceit are effective political instruments used to ensure the obedience of a population and the stability of a state.⁴

Interpretations vary regarding whether Machiavelli's intent was prescriptive, or if he was merely describing the political forces he observed in sixteenth-century Italy. Some even argue he was being satirical because his analysis was so brazenly indifferent to moral considerations.⁵ It is also possible that Machiavelli's audience was not the ruling class at all because they already had an inside understanding of the ruthless political dynamics he described. Rather, he may ultimately have been writing for the underclasses, to whom he was disclosing the mechanisms by which political dominance was achieved and

the Civil Rights Movement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sean Chabot, *Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement: African American Explorations of the Gandhian Repertoire* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012); Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Extending Horizons Books, 1973); Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This is An Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Nation Books, 2016); Mark Mattaini, *Strategic Nonviolent Power: The Science of Satyagraha* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013); Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

4 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (London: Penguin, 1961).

5 See, for instance, the opening pages of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Political Economy* (2010 [1755]), Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing; L. J. Andrew Villalon, "Machiavelli's 'Prince,' Political Science or Political Satire?: Garrett Mattingly Revisited," *Mediterranean Studies* 12 (2003).

maintained.⁶ Indeed, in his less widely read work, *Discourses on Livy*, he appears to express a commitment to republican forms of government, he illustrates their fragility, and he suggests means for buttressing them against descent into autocracy.⁷

Regardless of Machiavelli's intent, *The Prince* ended up laying the foundations of modern political "realism," and he came to epitomize the argument that "the ends justify the means."⁸ At the center of his realpolitik is a conception of political power as something that is exercised in purely instrumental and sometimes violent ways in struggles to capture and control the state.

A number of modern revolutionary movements, such as vanguard Communism, have adopted explicitly Machiavellian approaches to capturing the state. The American, French, and Haitian revolutions a century and a half earlier can also be understood in similar terms, along with countless other revolutionary struggles, including many that have been largely forgotten because they failed to succeed in capturing or maintaining control of a state. And violent movements to capture or influence a state's policy-making apparatus continue today. Thus, from the sixteenth-century argument of an Italian political philosopher, we can trace a recurrent line of modern reasoning that attempts to justify violence as a means to various political ends.

Within a generation of Machiavelli writing *The Prince*, a French political philosopher, Étienne de La Boétie, articulated a set of contrasting insights into the operation of political power, which have also had a significant influence within the discourse on means in relation to the question of violence. In his essay "The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude," La Boétie questioned the basis of the powers tyrannical rulers exercise to subjugate populations.⁹ Those powers of domination, he argues, can only be exercised with the implicit consent of a population, which comes in the form of voluntary submission to

6 Gramsci's work suggests such an interpretation. See Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1968).

7 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (c.1517).

8 Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

9 Étienne de La Boétie, "The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude," in *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, ed. Solomon James and Bernadeta Santo (Jessup, MD: Azafran Books, 2020).

authority. If a population withdraws consent by refusing, en masse, to obey a ruler, the ruler's powers of domination will collapse. La Boétie thus advocated for the strategic withdrawal of popular consent as a means of overthrowing tyranny. In effect, La Boétie formulated what would become a foundational idea underpinning modern nonviolent philosophy and practice: the idea of strategic civil disobedience as an alternative to violence in the pursuit of social justice.

Within a generation, La Boétie's ideas were partly taken up in a pamphlet by Huguenot Protestants, which advocated refusal to pay taxes to the French Catholic state in order to undermine their authority.¹⁰ And by the late eighteenth century, the concept of "passive resistance" was being employed in a manner that reflected La Boétie's political thinking.¹¹

By the mid-nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau, drawing inspiration partly from La Boétie, popularized the phrase "civil disobedience" in his essay "Resistance to Civil Government."¹² In that essay, he proclaimed his refusal to pay taxes to the U.S. government because those taxes were supporting slavery and the Mexican-American War — and he encouraged others to do the same. More generally, he asserted that individuals should not passively consent to laws they deem immoral or unjust.

A decade later, the first mass application of such ideas proved their efficacy, through Hungarian resistance to imperial Austrian rule.¹³ Over the span of a decade, Hungarians increasingly returned to traditional Hungarian clothing and other cultural expressions, refused to speak Austrian German, avoided Austrian public celebrations, boycotted Austrian goods, declined Austrian public service posts, dodged Austrian taxes, resisted Austrian military service, ignored Austrian laws, and filled Austrian jails. During this period, passive resistance became a way of life for much of the Hungarian population. Such resistance, combined

10 Harold Laski, "Introduction," in *A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963), 29; J. W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), 308.

11 For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary cites its use by F. Jebb, in his *Letters of Guatimozin Affairs of Ireland*.

12 Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in *Æsthetic Papers*, ed. Elizabeth Peabody (Boston, MA: The Editor and G. P. Putnam, 1849).

13 Tamás Csapody and Thomas Weber, "Hungarian Nonviolent Resistance against Austria and its Place in the History of Nonviolence," *Peace & Change* 32, no. 4 (2007).

with other pressures facing the Austrian Hapsburg Empire, pressured its monarch to grant full autonomy to Hungary in 1867. Hungary's success in this regard is often cited as the first successful modern expression of mass nonviolent resistance.¹⁴

The popularization of concepts such as passive resistance, civil disobedience, and noncooperation, coupled with the Hungarian success, inspired other movements in the following decades. For instance, Irish efforts to achieve home rule within the British Empire were initially pursued through nonviolent means such as boycotting British goods, withdrawing from the British parliament, and refusing military conscription. The founder of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, published a book on the Hungarian movement, offering it as a model for the Irish movement.¹⁵ In the same period, the Finnish also drew inspiration from the Hungarian experience as they pursued their own nonviolent struggle against the Russian Empire.¹⁶

It was in this context that Mohandas Gandhi — inspired by the writings of Thoreau and likeminded thinkers of the era, aware of Hungary's historical success, and watching Irish efforts to replicate the Hungarian approach¹⁷ — took up the concept of civil disobedience, elaborated it, experimented with it, demonstrated its political efficacy in some contexts, and established it as a centerpiece of the twentieth century nonviolent repertoire. In the process, he also argues there was an ontological basis for the power of civil disobedience: the power of normative truths. Gandhi asserted that normative truths — truths such as justice, love, compassion, and detachment — were every bit as real as

14 See, for example, Buddhadeva Bhattacharyya, *The Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi* (Calcutta: Calcutta Book House, 1969); Richard Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1934).

15 Arthur Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* (Dublin: Whelan and Son, 1904).

16 Steven Duncan Huxley, *Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland: Finnish "Passive Resistance" against Russification as a Case of Nonmilitary Struggle in the European Resistance Tradition* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1990); Brian Martin, "Steven Huxley and "Nonviolent" Struggle," in *Social Defense, Social Change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993).

17 Gandhi directly referenced Thoreau's thoughts on civil disobedience, as well as the Hungarian and Irish experiences, in his South African newspaper *Indian Opinion*. Refer to examinations of this in George Hendrick, "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha," *The New England Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1956); Csapody and Weber, "Hungarian Nonviolent Resistance against Austria and its Place in the History of Nonviolence."

the laws of physics and, like the laws of physics, the force of such truths could be harnessed in purposeful and predictable ways.

Gandhi's theory of nonviolent power was thus centered on his concept of *satyagraha*, which refers to truth-force or to the transformative social power that can be exerted by holding firmly but nonviolently to normative truths in the face of injustice and accepting the consequences.¹⁸ In the context of civil disobedience, this meant mustering the moral courage and self-discipline to suffer the unjust and sometimes violent consequences of disobeying oppressive laws in order to draw attention to those laws, stir the conscience of a population, mobilize them, and thereby exert popular moral pressure on authorities to change laws or, in the case of India, to leave it entirely.

With the relative success of Gandhi's efforts, his ideas and practices were soon adapted by others, most notably by many leaders of the U.S. civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King Jr. Over time, as King's own thinking about nonviolence developed, he began to emphasize, among other things, the Christian concept of *agape* — universal, unconditional, creative, redemptive love, expressed even toward one's oppressor — as one of those potent forces that could be harnessed to civil disobedience in the struggle for lasting social change. This is a power, King argues, that can help unite Black communities, foster courage and collective action within them, bridge racial divides, draw White people into the struggle, heal relationships and communities, and build a more just world.¹⁹

Following Gandhi and King, La Boétie's sixteenth-century theory of power was further elaborated by others within the evolving discourse on means. The most notable of those to contribute in this way was the political scientists Gene Sharp, whose encyclopedic work on nonviolence subsequently informed the strategic thinking of many movements around the world.²⁰ Sharp analyzed the myriad structures by which

18 Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance: Satyagraha*.

19 Refer, for example, to King's "The Power of Nonviolence" (p. 12-15), "An Experiment in Love" (p. 16-20), "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience" (p. 43-53), and "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" (p. 135-144) in James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: Martin Luther King Jr., the Essential Writings and Speeches* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). See also Michael Nojeim, *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance* (London: Praeger, 2004), 197-99.

20 Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

popular obedience to state power can be fostered. These include state institutions such as the police, the military, the courts, the prison system, schools, and state-run media. These also include non-state entities that can be ideologically aligned with the maintenance of a state, such as corporations, religious institutions, and commercial media. Based on this analysis, Sharp systematically examined how movements can raise popular awareness of the ways such institutions foster obedience to the state, and movements can then inspire and organize the strategic withdrawal of that obedience.

Inspired by Sharp's work, subsequent nonviolent strategists further elaborated this evolving theory of power by conceptualizing the aforementioned institutions as "pillars" on which state power rests.²¹ In this sense, members of a population rarely interact directly with "the state" — if by "the state" we mean its ultimate authorities or rulers. Rather, members of the population interact with, and sometimes work within or even lead, specific institutional pillars of the state. If enough of those pillars can be induced by the actions of the populace, by the actions of employees, and by their own institutional leadership, to withdraw support from the state, or from specific state policies, then the power of the state, or of specific policy regimes, collapses. This relatively sophisticated conception of the always-tenuous basis of state power enables the development of movement strategies that identify the most relevant pillars and target their support of the state through a growing repertoire of nonviolent tactics that can exert leverage on those pillars.²² Thus, from the early modern ideas of Étienne de La Boétie we can trace another significant line of modern reasoning about ends and means.

The theory of power that evolved from La Boétie's insights has its limits, which also have been recognized within the discourse on means. Consider, for example, the system of racialized slavery constructed in the colonial era. Within that system, tyranny was decentralized across a vast system of plantations, buttressed by an array of institutions whose White agents, along with the White population more generally, had

21 Robert Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals* (Boston, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004); Engler and Engler, *This is An Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century*.

22 Schock, "The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance"; Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

internalized a tyrannical race consciousness they often enforced with swift brutality. In such a context, the notion that enslaved Black people were engaged in a form of voluntary servitude from which they merely needed to withdraw their consent en masse is nonsensical.

However, even in this context, La Boétie's insights into power become relevant when one considers that the construct of "race" and the entire institutional apparatus that was built upon it served as a divide-and-conquer mechanism that set exploited "White" labor over and against exploited "Black" labor in order to protect the interests of economic elites. Such elites did not want to see a revolutionary alliance form across the entire economic underclass — an alliance that might have constructed a more egalitarian social order that could have improved the conditions of the population as a whole.²³ In this context, it was the exploited White classes that occupied La Boétie's theoretical position of voluntary servitude from which they might have withdrawn their consent en masse — had not so many of them been blinded by the spurious racial hierarchy they had internalized.

Similar dynamics constitute one of the most significant obstacles to the mass withdrawal of consent within many systems of oppression, from capitalist exploitation to patriarchy to caste systems. Such dynamics were alluded to by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their theory of ideology and elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in his theory of cultural hegemony.²⁴ This is one of the reasons that, by the mid-twentieth century, so many movements for social justice were developing strategies of popular education and critical consciousness raising. One of the most influential and widely known approaches to this was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.²⁵ Freire's concept of *conscientização* (conscientization)

23 Barbara Fields and Karen Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2022); Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origin of Racial Oppression* (New York: Verso, 2022); Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

24 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967 [1846]); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

25 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York:

entails the development of critical consciousness, by which oppressed peoples learn to more clearly discern and articulate the social forces and contradictions acting on their lives, including oppressive beliefs they may have internalized, and develop a corresponding sense of agency directed at transforming their social reality. As a praxis, conscientization enables oppressed people to see themselves not as the objects of other people's will, but as self-determining subjects. Freirean pedagogy and related efforts thus seek to empower growing numbers of people to be protagonists of social change.²⁶

But becoming a protagonist of social change still leaves open the question of what form collective action should take in the pursuit of change. Returning to the example of enslaved Black people, the visible mass withdrawal of obedience was not a sensible option. Enslaved people did resist in more subtle ways by slowing their work, damaging their tools, and other creative means. Some also escaped slavery and braved the dangers of trying to reach lands that offered freedom. Some even attempted, with varying degrees of success, to set up hidden subsistence-based communities after escaping. But to end the system of slavery itself, violence may well have been the only available means. This appears to have been Frederick Douglass's reluctant conclusion, which warrants closer attention because it illustrates the significance of context.

Having escaped slavery as a young man, Douglass primarily sought to use the powerful oratory skills he developed to advance the abolitionist movement. He did this, in part, by appealing to the hearts and minds of White people, seeking to raise their consciousness, and urging them to use their privileged positions to abolish slavery. He also engaged in nonviolent efforts to directly challenge the Northern racial prejudice and discrimination that enabled people in the North to tolerate slavery in the South. Those efforts include his repeated acts

Herder and Herder, 1972 [1968]).

26 Liam Kane, "Forty Years of Popular Education in Latin America: Lessons for Social Movements Today," in *Learning and Education for a Better World: The Role of Social Movements*, ed. Budd Hall, Darlene Clover, and Jim Crowther (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 2012); Kathleen Loughlin, *Women's Perceptions of Transformative Learning Experiences Within Consciousness-Raising* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993); Nilan Yu, *Consciousness-Raising: Critical Pedagogy and Practice for Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres, eds., *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

of civil disobedience against segregated transportation in the North.²⁷ Over time, however, Douglass became convinced that in a region like the American South, which had become so economically dependent on slavery and so infected by racism, abolition could not be achieved without force. In this context, he offered his own widely cited analysis of the link between power, domination, and submission.

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North and held and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.²⁸

Not long after offering this analysis, as the real possibility of a civil war to end slavery approached, Douglass enthusiastically encouraged it. As the war began, he exhorted all who were committed to ending slavery — especially Black men — to “drink as deeply in the martial spirit of the times as possible.” “The cry is now for war,” he pronounced, “vigorous war, war to the bitter end and war till the traitors are effectually and permanently put down.” “Let the grim visage of a Northern army confront them from one direction, a furious slave insurrection meet them at another, and starvation threaten them from still another.”²⁹

Of course, Douglass was not the only abolitionist, nor the only Black abolitionist, to have a voice in antebellum debates about the use of violence. There was a wide spectrum of Black and White views on violence as a means of achieving abolition. But Douglass’s view was

27 See Douglass’s description of these efforts in his reflections on “The Jim Crow Car” in Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855).

28 Frederick Douglass, *A Runaway Slave from Baltimore: The Writings and Speeches of Frederick Douglass* (Bristol: Read & Co. Books, 2020), 192–93.

29 Quoted in David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 399–403.

prominent, and it is instructive because it compels us to take cultural and historical context into account as we consider questions about power, realism, and violence within the discourse on means. Whether or not civil war was the only way to end plantation slavery in the U.S. is a question for academic debate. Such debates notwithstanding, the civil war did achieve this end. What it was unable to do was root out the underlying racism that had initially emerged to justify and enforce slavery. Such racism remains an endemic social pathology, manifest in what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlives of slavery,” which have continued to mutate into ever-new forms of discrimination to the present day.³⁰

It is also worth noting that there was a strongly masculine valence to Douglass’s thought.³¹ It can be argued that his advocacy for violence as a means of struggle, and the conception of power that informed this advocacy, was partly an expression of his strong masculinity. Indeed, the gendered dimension of these debates over violence is something that repeatedly suggests itself, as we see in the discussion that follows.

Beyond Conventional Politics

The abolition movement, and ongoing efforts to overcome racism more generally, illustrate the limitations of working for transformative social change solely within the formal institutions of modern democratic societies, from electoral and legislative processes to the courts. Under the right conditions, some advances can undoubtedly be made through the conventional means afforded by such institutions. But slavery was constructed and ratified by such institutions. Indeed, it was unambiguously written into the initial U.S. constitution. And after the emancipation proclamation at the end of the civil war and the failed period of reconstruction that followed, the U.S. federal government and many state governments were recaptured by a succession of political

30 Saidiya Hartman, “The Abolition of Slavery and... the Nonevent of Emancipation,” in *My Emancipation Don’t Fit Your Equation*, ed. Brian Lozenski (Boston, MA: Brill, 2022); see also Eric Foner, *Reconstruction Updated Edition: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2014).

31 For a discussion of these masculinist tendencies, see Angela Davis, “Introduction to the City Lights edition,” in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2010).

elites that continued formulating and enforcing a range of racially discriminatory laws and engaging in equally discriminatory forms of public spending.³²

Democracies are highly susceptible to structural injustices of this kind. When democratic decision making is structured as a contest of power, it should not surprise us that the most powerful social groups will tend to capture the state and govern according to their own perceived self-interests and ideological agendas.³³ Authoritarian states also tend to embody structural injustices. Within such states, powerful individuals or social groups capture the state for extended periods of time. They can thereby govern according to their interests and agendas with few checks on the arbitrary exercise of power.

For these reasons, the discourse on means we are focused on is concerned primarily with unconventional means that lie outside the formal institutions of existing democratic or authoritarian states, even though some of those unconventional means are intended to apply pressure on the state or, in some cases, achieve the (re)capture of state institutions by previously subordinate social groups.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, one of the most significant and potentially impactful nonviolent means to emerge in struggles for social justice was the general strike. These strikes hearken back to the *secessiones plebis* of the Roman Republic (BC 494 to 287).³⁴ A *secessio plebis* was a mass withdrawal of the plebeian class from the city of Rome — a protest emigration — that left the patrician class to fend for itself. This was a means of expressing collective grievances against the patrician class. These periodic exercises of popular power foreshadowed La Boétie's theory regarding the voluntary withdrawal of consent from conditions of oppression. But the modern concept of an organized general strike was first clearly articulated in 1832 by a Quaker shoemaker named William Benbow.³⁵ In 1835, the first local general strike, coordinated

32 Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Norton, 2018).

33 Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004); Michael Karlberg, "Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?", in *The Bahá'í World, 2005-2006: An International Record* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2007).

34 Max Cary and H. H. Scullard, *A History of Rome Down to the Reign of Constantine*, 3rd edn. (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

35 William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*

across multiple trades and industries, occurred in Philadelphia. In 1842, the first nationwide general strike occurred across Great Britain. Some other general strikes followed in the ensuing decades, and the concept of a general strike was increasingly advocated by social reformers, but the difficulties involved in mobilizing, coordinating, and sustaining such efforts across multiple sectors of the economy have limited the number of such strikes.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, activists in a number of countries were experimenting with a range of other unconventional and often dramatic means to advance various social justice movements. News of these provocative social actions began to spread across greater distances via new modes of travel such as steam-driven ships and locomotives, along with new technologies of communication, such as transcontinental and trans-Atlantic telegraph lines and news wire services. A nascent global process of cross-movement learning was thus developing, within which questions about ends and means were central.

For instance, in the late nineteenth century, labor movements were spreading globally and within them many questions were being raised about means. These movements were developing a repertoire of tactics that included marches and other forms of mass public demonstration, as well as work stoppages, pickets, and strikes, to pressure employers for better wages and working conditions, to raise public awareness about their concerns, and to pressure states to play a more active role in legislating for better labor conditions. Such tactics were not yet legal in many countries, so these were often considered forms of civil disobedience. In some cases, more militant labor activists also engaged in property destruction, physical confrontations, and exchanges of lethal violence with state police and corporate security.³⁶

For example, in 1894, workers at the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago, which made luxury railway cars, declared a strike. The American Railway Workers Union declared a sympathy boycott and its

(Newburyport, MA: The Journeyman Press, 1978).

36 See, for example, David Bullock, *Coal Wars: Unions, Strikes, and Violence in Depression-Era Central Washington* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2014); Robert Shogan, *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story Of America's Largest Labor Uprising* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (Norwell, MA: Anchor, 2007).

workers refused to switch trains carrying Pullman cars through Chicago. This brought transcontinental trade passing through the nation's busiest railway hub to a halt. The combined strike and boycott, though initially nonviolent, was considered by the government to be an illegal coercive action. Fourteen thousand armed troops, police, and private militia were dispatched to retake control of the rail system. This caused the confrontation to escalate. Seven hundred train cars were destroyed, rail company buildings and equipment were burned, and thirteen strikers were killed. Public opinion largely turned against the strikers — due not only to the violence that erupted but also due to the disruption the strike caused to the livelihoods of so many others, both rich and poor. Thus, the strike was ultimately broken, and public debates ensued among committed social reformers regarding the efficacy and the ethics of the means employed.³⁷

A decade later, the Women's Social and Political Union in the U.K., led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, began experimenting with a range of tactics in pursuit of women's suffrage. Initially, the Union organized nonviolent marches and demonstrations, disrupted the meetings of politicians, and unsuccessfully attempted to occupy the House of Parliament with a force of 60,000 protestors. However, due to the lack of a meaningful political response, the Union escalated its tactics to include window smashing, burning unoccupied houses, and other forms of property destruction. When Union activists were arrested, they engaged in prison hunger strikes.³⁸

American activists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns participated in a number of Union actions while living in the U.K., before returning to the U.S. to join the suffrage movement at home. Seeing that the U.S. movement's conventional lobbying and petitioning were not leading to progress, Paul and Burns began organizing nonviolent campaigns of civil disobedience to raise public awareness and pressure the President and Congress — who had entered the First World War with the argument of fighting for democracy abroad — to include women in democracy at home. Through their repeated arrests they began flooding the jails with

37 Alexander Livingston, "Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey's Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017).

38 Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette: The History of the Women's Militant Suffrage Movement* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2015).

women who refused to pay fines and, in turn, refused to perform prison labor. Like their sisters in the U.K., they also engaged in prison hunger strikes.³⁹ But Paul and Burns disagreed with the U.K. suffragettes on the matter of property destruction, which they refrained from. In the U.S., full women's suffrage was achieved almost a decade before the U.K., and some attribute this to the American movement's nonviolent commitments.⁴⁰

Whether or not such an attribution is justified, the tactical split between the two movements illustrates the many questions that were becoming objects of movement learning. Was property destruction an effective way to advance a movement for social justice? Is self-harm or the threat of self-harm (e.g., hunger strikes) an effective means of pursuing change? Or, on the labor front, to what extent do economic disruptions advance a movement or set it back? And are all of these tactical questions context dependent, or is tactical efficacy a function of underlying normative truths that are context independent? Such questions would become recurrent themes within emergent global processes of movement learning.

An insightful illustration of the growing speed of this global learning process was the emergence and proliferation of the boycott. This tactic began in late nineteenth-century Ireland under conditions of appalling poverty, as tenant evictions and landlord cruelty became intolerable and spawned a period of agrarian agitation and activism against landlords and land laws. The ensuing "Land War" included occasional episodes of violence, but it was primarily characterized by nonviolent forms of social action. One such struggle occurred in 1880, after Charles Boycott, the agent of an absentee landlord, attempted to evict eleven tenants from the lands he managed. In response, local workers refused to work in his house, in his stables, and in his fields through the harvest and beyond. Local merchants also refused to do business with him, the local mailman refused to deliver his mail, and he and his entire family were locally shunned. Journalists began using the verb "boycott" to describe this collective action. The story and the concept quickly spread through news

39 Tina Cassidy, *Mr. President, How Long Must We Wait?: Alice Paul, Woodrow Wilson, and the Fight for the Right to Vote* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

40 See, for example, George Lakey, *How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2018), 153–62.

outlets across the Atlantic and the tactic has become a staple of nonviolent organizing ever since, often used in conjunction with other tactics.⁴¹

Mohandas Gandhi was one of those who was aware of these global processes of movement learning and conscious of the pragmatic and ethical questions these processes raised. It was with these questions in mind that he initially began to experiment with nonviolent approaches to end the anti-Indian discrimination he witnessed and experienced in South Africa, where he had moved in 1893 after studying law in London. Two decades later, when he returned to his native India, he continued to experiment systematically with such approaches, now within the independence movement that sought to end the centuries-long rule of the British. Over this combined period, which spanned half a century, Gandhi articulated his underlying nonviolent philosophy, which now warrants closer examination because of its unparalleled influence within the discourse on ends and means.

Toward a New Realism?

As alluded to above, Gandhi's philosophy rests on the assumption that human existence is governed by normative truths about how humans ought to live. Elaborating on this theme, he wrote that "the world rests upon the bedrock of satya or truth."⁴²

The law of love will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not. Just as a scientist will work wonders out of various applications of the laws of nature, even so a man who applies the law of love with scientific precision can work greater wonders. For the force of nonviolence is infinitely more wonderful and subtle than the material forces of nature, like, for instance, electricity.⁴³

In accordance with this conception, Gandhi described his social activism as "experiments with truth," and he saw these as contributions to the

41 Colin Murphy, *Boycott* (Los Angeles, CA: Brandon Publishing, 2012); David Feldman, *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

42 Quoted in E. Stanley Jones, *Gandhi: Portrayal of a Friend* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1948), p. 82.

43 Mohandas Gandhi, "My Faith in Nonviolence," in *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002 [1930]), 46.

global process of movement learning.⁴⁴ Within his methodology of satyagraha, two of the most significant truths he posits are *ahimsa* and *tapasya*. Ahimsa is a Sanskrit word that translates roughly as noninjury or nonviolence. For Gandhi, ahimsa was a moral duty that could not be fulfilled in a passive state. Rather, this duty had to be expressed through actions directed at reducing harm and violence in the world through means that were consistent with these ends. *Tapasya* is a Sanskrit word that translates roughly as a practice that generates heat, energy, or creative power. In Hinduism and Buddhism, it is associated with self-discipline, self-purification, and self-suffering. For Gandhi, tapasya entailed a willingness to suffer on the path of truth, in order to generate powers of individual and social transformation. He asserted that tapasya purifies the intentions and galvanizes the wills of those engaged in satyagraha, brings widespread attention to the injustices its practitioners seek to address, stirs the moral sentiments of populations witnessing such commitments, and can even change the hearts and minds of some who previously benefited from unjust arrangements.

Holding firmly to ahimsa and tapasya requires purposeful action and moral courage. The world witnessed these qualities demonstrated in campaigns of civil disobedience such as the Dandi Satyagraha — or the Salt March of 1930. In this campaign, Gandhi, and the ranks of those who joined him along the course of his 240-mile march to the sea, made salt in open defiance of an unjust colonial law that prohibited independent Indian salt making (to force dependence on the British salt monopoly). Journalists from around the world were observing, and the campaign set up a moral dilemma for the British. If they ignored the salt-making, it would indicate their own recognition that their laws were unjust and unenforceable. If they attempted to enforce the laws, it would demonstrate the manifest injustice of British rule in India. Though they initially tried to ignore it, they soon attempted to suppress it through violence and incarceration. Large segments of the British public, and countless others around the world, were appalled at the Raj's actions and impressed by the courage and strength of the Indians who willingly endured such suffering on the path of truth and justice.

Such campaigns played a critical role in India's successful effort to

44 Mohandas Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1983 [1948]).

throw off the oppressive yoke of the British Raj. In the process, Gandhi — more than any other modern figure — popularized the theory and practice of nonviolent social change and inspired many subsequent movements around the world to adapt the principles and methods he had refined. In effect, Gandhi's experiments with truth suggested the possibility that a new realism — a moral realism — could prove superior to the Machiavellian political realism adopted by the British empire and by so many others. At the center of this new realism was the premise that if we want to live in a world that is free of violence, our means need to be consistent with that end, because violence begets violence.

Many others were also thinking deeply about the relationship between the ends and means of social change in the first half of the twentieth century. Aldous Huxley — an influential Western intellectual of the era — wrote a book-length collection of essays in 1937 titled *Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization*.⁴⁵ From a young age, Huxley had displayed a deep concern for social justice. Having lived through the First World War and then witnessed the rise of fascism and Soviet totalitarianism, Huxley became increasingly concerned about the employment of violence in the modern world by people professing commitments to social progress. In the process, he was drawn toward pacificism and toward the rational application of what many Eastern and Western mystical traditions posit as transcendent truths about human existence.

In *Ends and Means*, Huxley challenges the prevalent view that laudable ends can justify immoral means — or the view that there is a shortcut to utopia by way of violent revolution. Ends cannot justify means, he asserts, because the means employed determine the nature of the ends produced. Gandhi was making a similar argument at the same time, and this is a theme we will return to.

In the meantime, it is helpful to note that Huxley rests his argument on a distinction between two broad approaches to social change: changing the systems and structures that constitute society or changing the hearts and minds that constitute society. The former have been the focus of many violent revolutions, all of which have yielded yet another social order based on violence. The latter, he argues, should be

45 Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1941).

the primary focus of our efforts to achieve a better world. Such efforts require means that are consistent with the vision of a better world that humanity has perennially aspired toward: a world characterized by peace, justice, freedom, and brotherly love. The means of achieving these ends, he asserts, include all those educative, enlightening, and ennobling processes by which human virtues are fostered — virtues that empower us to regulate our worldly passions and selfish attachments. Such passions and attachments, Huxley asserts, are the root causes of evil and injustice, and they can never be rooted out by a coercive state or a violent revolution.

As Talcott Parsons noted in a review of *Ends and Means*, Huxley's book was, from a sociological point of view, a significant work because it articulated increasingly influential ideas and sentiments that constituted an important shift in the "deepest cultural currents" of the time.⁴⁶ However, as a sociologist, Parsons thought those ideas and sentiments were ultimately naïve and that Huxley "tends seriously to underestimate the importance of force in the modern world."⁴⁷ Indeed, the still young field of sociology was becoming increasingly premised on the productive role social conflict plays in the modern world, and authors like Max Weber began writing about ends and means in this context.⁴⁸

Weber, echoing Thomas Hobbes, asserts that the foundational source of a state's power is its exclusive right to employ physical force or violence, ideally for the greater good. In this sense, Weber believes that the basis of all political action is political conflict, and violence is the means that undergirds all political conflict. As he further argues, the politician must act not from an ethic of love but from an ethic of responsibility, and the latter dictates that if you fail to confront evil with force, you are responsible for evil winning out. In this sense, violent police actions by the state may sometimes be needed to secure and enforce the system of law and order that a stable society depends on, thereby protecting citizens from anarchic violence and lawlessness.

46 Talcott Parsons, "Review of *Ends and Means* by Aldous Huxley," *The American Journal of sociology* 43, no. 5 (1938): 833.

47 Parsons, "Review of *Ends and Means* by Aldous Huxley," 832.

48 Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 77-128 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

Likewise, military actions can be necessary to protect a population from external threats. And, in the case of unjust laws, or tyrannical rulers, violent revolutions can be equally necessary. Thus, Weber argues that laudable ends can justify violent means in the political domain. And, in keeping with Weber's line of reasoning, *realpolitik* became a dominant premise of twentieth-century political sociology.

This line of reasoning regarding the ethical responsibility to employ violence in some contexts was reinforced by the experience of World War II and the holocaust. At the height of the Second World War, George Orwell wrote an essay in which he argues that pacifism is objectively pro-fascist because it offered no meaningful response to fascist militarism and imperialism.⁴⁹ In 1949, Orwell followed up with another essay titled "Reflections on Gandhi." In that essay, he wrote, "In relation to the late war, one question every pacifist had a clear obligation to answer was 'What about the Jews?' Are you prepared to see them exterminated? If not, how do you propose to save them without resorting to war?"⁵⁰

Such questions raise legitimate concerns about the limits of strict pacifism, at least in some contexts. But pacifism is too easily conflated with nonviolent social action, and the two are not identical. Gandhi rejected this conflation. "I would risk violence a thousand times rather than risk the emasculation of a whole race," he wrote.⁵¹ "Where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence."⁵² "Life itself involves some kind of violence and we have to choose the path of least violence."⁵³ What Gandhi believed was that in most contexts nonviolent collective action was more effective than violence. But nonviolent action was not to be confused with pacifism, which he saw as a form of inaction or passivity in the face of injustice.

Similar views have been echoed by countless theorists of nonviolence since Gandhi. In *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler takes this view even further by arguing

49 George Orwell, "Pacifism and War," *Partisan Review* August-September (1942).

50 George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review* January (1949), 90.

51 R. K. Prabhu and U. R. Rao, eds., *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan publishing House, 1989), 187.

52 Prabhu and Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, 187.

53 Prabhu and Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, 187.

nonviolence does not necessarily emerge from a pacific or calm part of the soul. Very often it is an expression of rage, indignation, and aggression. Although some people confuse aggression with violence, it is central to the argument of this book to foreground the fact that nonviolent forms of resistance can and must be aggressively pursued. A practice of aggressive nonviolence is, therefore, not a contradiction in terms.⁵⁴

Of course, Butler's underlying worldview differs from Gandhi's. Butler views nonviolence as a social and political necessity, and she understands anger as a valid motivator for aggressive but nonviolent forms of action. Gandhi views nonviolence as a moral force deriving from a deeper spiritual truth, and he understands anger as something that can be overcome through self-purification on a path of nonviolent action. But both agree that nonviolence is an active rather than passive response to injustice.

By Any Means Necessary?

Nonviolent thought and practice in the early twentieth century faced other criticisms as well. Some of the more influential criticisms — even before the rise of fascism and the perceived need to respond to it with force — came from revolutionary socialist thinkers. For instance, in 1906, Georges Sorel wrote a series of essays that were soon published as a book titled *Reflections on Violence*. In those essays, Sorel argues that violence, accompanied by general strikes, was the essential means of fomenting an apocalyptic confrontation by which emancipatory socialism would triumph over the oppressive capitalist order. Socialist moral duty thus required hostility and open aggression toward the capitalist other, within a “clear and brutal expression of the class war” that would “save the world from barbarism.”⁵⁵

This line of reasoning would soon become enacted by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Based on their interpretation of Marxist theory, Lenin and Trotsky believed that the ruling class would never willingly give up power. Only a violent revolution of the working classes could bring about the transition to socialism. This required capturing state power and seizing the means of economic productivity to establish a

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London: Verso, 2020), 21.

⁵⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 91, 98.

dictatorship of the proletariat, led by a political vanguard capable of raising the consciousness of the masses, as a prelude to the establishment of a Communist state.⁵⁶

However, as Lenin and Trotsky worked to raise a revolutionary force in Russia, they had to confront a significant homegrown current of nonviolent thought. In 1894, shortly after Gandhi had moved to South Africa, the great Russian novelist and philosopher Leo Tolstoy wrote his nonviolent treatise *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. In that book, and in subsequent correspondence and essays, Tolstoy articulated an anarchist Christian philosophy of nonviolence based on the principles of nonresistance to evil, rejection of war, rejection of state and church authority, and commitment to personal moral transformation.⁵⁷ Gandhi was influenced in part by Tolstoy's work (as was Huxley), and Gandhi corresponded with Tolstoy as he was developing his own ideas and approaches, which went well beyond Tolstoy's framework of individual passive resistance by focusing on organized campaigns of nonviolent collective action.⁵⁸

It was against the dual backdrop of Tolstoy's influential philosophy of nonviolence and the horrors of the First World War, in which Russia had suffered devastating losses, that Lenin and Trotsky were advancing their campaign for violent revolution. Though Lenin was the primary theorist of the revolution, Trotsky was its primary military organizer. Two decades later, in exile after Joseph Stalin's rise to power and the violence that ensued, Trotsky penned a philosophical defense of the violent means he had helped usher in. His essay warrants close examination because some of its key themes continue to echo in the discourse on ends and means.

In "Their Morals and Ours," Trotsky argues that morality is merely an ideological class construct. Bourgeois morality, with which he associated religious principles of nonviolence along with the philosophies of Tolstoy and Gandhi, fosters a "common sense" that

56 Alan Woods and Ted Grant, *Lenin and Trotsky - What They Really Stood For* (London: Wellred Publications, 2000).

57 Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1894); Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York: Bergman Publishers, 1967).

58 William Green, *Tolstoy and Gandhi* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

“prevents the oppressed from arising against their oppressors.”⁵⁹ These dominant codes of morality, he argues, are a form of class deception that perpetuates the mass exploitation and violence of class domination. (Conversely, Friedrich Nietzsche had previously argued, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, that the dominant codes of morality in the West were a construct of the subordinate classes and they functioned, in part, to restrain the aggression and oppression of dominant classes.)⁶⁰

Having rejected nonviolent morality as an oppressive construct, Trotsky went on to argue that, from a utilitarian standpoint, any means that lead to the greatest common good — that is, any means that overcome mass oppression — are justified. Modern democracies, he argues, were established through violent revolution against oppressive aristocracies (notwithstanding counterexamples his argument ignores, such as Canada). Likewise, he points out, the abolition of slavery in the U.S. was achieved through civil war. In this regard, Trotsky argues that “a slave-owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains — let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!”⁶¹ His (repeated) reference to eunuchs in this tract is apparently meant to denote those who are not “man” enough to embrace violence in the pursuit of an allegedly justified political end. Elaborating this theme, he continues,

Civil war is the most severe of all forms of war. It is unthinkable not only without violence against tertiary figures but, under contemporary techniques, without killing old men, old women, and children. Must one be reminded of Spain? The only possible answer of the “friends” of Republican Spain sounds like this: Civil war is better than fascist slavery. But this completely correct assertion merely signifies that the *end* (democracy or socialism) justifies, under certain conditions, such *means* as violence and murder.⁶²

Trotsky then comments on the similarities between labor strikes and violent class revolutions, arguing

59 Leon Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” in *Their Morals and Ours: A Debate on Ends and Means* (Montreal: Pathfinder Press, 2018 [1938]), 52.

60 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998).

61 Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” 48.

62 Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” 46. (Italics and parentheses in the original.)

There is no impervious demarcation between “peaceful” class struggle and revolution. Every strike embodies in an unexpanded form all the elements of civil war. Each side strives to impress the opponent with an exaggerated representation of its resoluteness to struggle and its material resources. Through their press, agents, and spies the capitalists labor to frighten and demoralize the strikers. From their side, the workers’ pickets, where persuasion does not avail, are compelled to resort to force. Thus “lie and worse” are an inseparable part of the class struggle even in its most elementary form.⁶³

“Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means,” he concludes, “which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle.”⁶⁴ Sixteen months after penning these words, Trotsky summarized his argument in another essay titled “The Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism.”

Civilization can be saved only by the socialist revolution. To accomplish the overturn, the proletariat needs all its strength, all its resolution, all its audacity, passion, and ruthlessness. Above all it must be completely free from the fictions of religion, “democracy,” and transcendental morality — the spiritual chains forged by the enemy to tame and enslave it. Only that which prepares the complete and final overthrow of imperialist bestiality is moral, and nothing else.⁶⁵

In direct response to Trotsky’s argument, John Dewey, the influential pragmatist philosopher, published an essay titled “Means and Ends.”⁶⁶ In that essay, Dewey accepts Trotsky’s premise that, from a consequentialist standpoint, laudable ends — such as liberating humanity from oppression — can justify means. But Dewey argues that such ends can only justify means that are proven to actually lead to those ends. And he points out that there is no objective evidence proving that violent class conflict will liberate humanity from oppression. The

63 Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” 46–47.

64 Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” 60.

65 Leon Trotsky, “The Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism,” in *Their Morals and Ours: A Debate on Ends and Means* (Montreal: Pathfinder Press, 2018 [1939]), 79.

66 John Dewey, “Means and Ends,” in *Their Morals and Ours: A Debate on Ends and Means* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2018 [1938]).

necessity and efficacy of those violent means, Dewey points out, are merely conclusions Trotsky deduces from the Marxist theory of history he subscribes to. At best, the means those deductions point to need to be objectively tested, alongside other potential means. This calls for a pragmatic posture of learning that entails “an examination of all means that are likely to attain this end without any fixed preconception as to what they must be.”⁶⁷ On the question of violent class conflict, Dewey explains that his own pragmatic approach

does not automatically rule out [violent] class struggle as one means for attaining the end. But it does rule out the deductive method of arriving at it as a means, to say nothing of its being the *only* means. The selection of class struggle as a means has to be justified... by an examination of actual consequences of its use, not deductively. Historical considerations are certainly relevant to this examination. But the assumption of a *fixed law* of social development is not relevant. It is as if a biologist or a physician were to assert that a certain law of biology which he accepts is so related to the end of health that the means of arriving at health — the only means — can be deduced from it, so that no further examination of biological phenomena is needed. The whole case is prejudged.⁶⁸

In this regard, Dewey points out that the theory of history Trotsky’s deduction derives from also needs to be thoughtfully examined. The assumption that class conflict is *the* determining law of history “closes the doors to further examination of history — just as an assertion that the Newtonian laws are the final laws of physics would preclude further search for physical laws.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, Dewey concludes, even if one accepts the necessity of class struggle, “There are presumably several, perhaps many, different ways by means of which the class struggle may be carried on. How can a choice be made among these different ways except by examining their consequences in relation to the goal of liberation of mankind?”⁷⁰ It thus remains the case that nonviolent means of class struggle might prove, empirically, to be as effective or more effective than violent means.

Two decades prior to Dewey’s response to Trotsky, at the height of the First World War, as pacifist sentiments were growing among many of his

67 Dewey, “Means and Ends,” 84.

68 Dewey, “Means and Ends,” 86. (Italics in the original.)

69 Dewey, “Means and Ends,” 87.

70 Dewey, “Means and Ends,” 87.

peers, Dewey wrote a series of essays on “Conscience and Compulsion,” “Force and Coercion,” and “Force, Violence, and Law” that brought into focus another important consideration in the discourse on ends and means.⁷¹ In brief, Dewey believed that social and political action should function as reflective modes of collective learning-through-action that can enrich democratic deliberation focused on improving the human condition. His general commitment, in this regard, was to rational deliberative processes advancing democratically within the rule of law. But he recognized that, even within democratic societies, dominant ideologies can naturalize or conceal profound social injustices even as dominant institutions can impede legitimate efforts to address such injustices.

In this context, Dewey believed collective actions that employ coercive force in the pursuit of social change — such as militant strikes and acts of civil disobedience — can play an important role: they can raise awareness of widely ignored social conditions and problematize them within the public mind, which are preconditions of deliberative public inquiry into how such conditions can be meliorated. In this regard, Dewey conceptualizes violence as an excessive use of coercive force that exacerbates the problematized conditions by, among other things, severing the social bonds needed to advance the deliberative search for solutions. In contrast, nonviolent forms of coercive social action can clarify collective interests, galvanize new solidarities, foster the development of new capacities, and bring previously excluded voices into the sphere of public deliberation. Thus, according to Dewey, nondeliberative means characterized by nonviolent coercion can be justified if they advance deliberative ends.⁷²

Subsequent theorists of deliberative democracy express similar ideas in ways that more directly highlight power dynamics. For instance, Jürgen Habermas argues that a truly democratic public sphere requires, among other things, the elimination of coercive power relations within processes of public deliberation.⁷³ However, prior to such processes of

71 All three essays were republished in Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

72 For a further examination of Dewey’s views on this topic, see Livingston, “Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey’s Democratic Theory.”

73 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

deliberation, actually existing power inequalities determine who even has a voice within the public sphere. Thus, as political scientists like Jane Mansbridge and her colleagues have pointed out, when marginalized segments of society are able to organize coercive forms of nonviolent action that force journalists, politicians, other institutional actors, and members of the wider public to pay attention, those actions can at least temporarily equalize the power dynamics in ways that give marginalized groups a voice in the public sphere.⁷⁴

Furthermore, coercive nonviolence is arguably justified when it is required to defend the presence and voice of a marginalized social group, within the public sphere, from opponents who reject the fundamental norms of democratic deliberation and the basic human rights that undergird it, including the right to be present and have a voice.⁷⁵ Thus, as Dewey and many subsequent theorists and activists argue, nonviolent collective actions may sometimes be needed to create the necessary conditions for inclusive public deliberation. This is the argument Judith Butler advances with her performative theory of assembly. In Butler's view, collective public actions such as protests, demonstrations, and occupations are forms of collectively embodied speech that are used to enact political claims, necessitated by the conditions of exclusion and precarity some social groups face.⁷⁶

Others have pointed out, however, that forcing entry into the public sphere through dramatic and contentious means — even when those means are nonviolent — is often a Faustian bargain.⁷⁷ Achieving entry in this manner tends to simplify, distort, and marginalize a movement's voices and concerns.

Returning to the question of revolutionary violence, Sorel and Trotsky were not the last twentieth-century voices advocating violence in the pursuit of social justice, and it is important to consider subsequent arguments and counterarguments on this theme. Beyond revolutionary

74 Jane Mansbridge et al., "The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2010).

75 Jane Mansbridge et al., "A Systematic Approach to Deliberative Democracy," in *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

76 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

77 A compelling examination of this problem can be found in Stephen Dale, *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1996).

socialism, the most significant context in which such arguments have been advanced has been anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles for national liberation, cultural autonomy, and human dignity. Within this context, the most influential twentieth-century advocate of revolutionary violence was Frantz Fanon. Fanon's arguments informed Black liberation struggles across Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, along with countless other anti-colonial liberation struggles around the world.

As a psychiatrist and philosopher, Fanon offered penetrating insights into the terrible psychic and cultural toll racism and colonization inflicted on Black peoples. He also elucidated the reasons that racialized colonialism could only be established and maintained through brutal violence of the kind he and countless others had long witnessed. Such violence on the part of the oppressor, he argues, could not be overcome without counter-violence on the part of the oppressed. Though he regretted the necessity of violence, he saw it as a means that was imposed by colonialism itself. It was imposed through the brutal everyday violence colonialism relied on, through the narrative violence it inflicts via the denigrating ways colonized people are represented within the arc of history, and through the violence it projects into the future via conceptions of the colonizer as civilizing agents. "Therefore," he wrote, "colonized people, caught in a web of three-dimensional violence, a meeting point of multiple, diverse, repeated, and cumulative violences, are soon logically confronted by the problem of ending the colonial regime *by any means necessary*."⁷⁸ "Decolonization," Fanon thus wrote, "reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation" that "can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence."⁷⁹

78 Frantz Fanon, "Why We Use Violence: Address to the Accra Positive Action Conference, April 1960," in *The Political Writings from Alienation and Freedom*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robert Young (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 119. Italics added to emphasize Fanon's use of a phrase that is commonly invoked in the discourse on ends and means, and is often attributed to Malcolm X. Malcolm X invoked the phrase several years after Fanon, in a speech he made at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964. Fanon himself appears to have borrowed the phrase from Jean-Paul Sartre, who used it in 1947 in the play "Dirty Hands" (Act 5, Scene 3, published in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, translated by Stuart Gilbert and Lionel Abel).

79 Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 3.

Fanon dismissed nonviolent praxis as a construct of the colonialist bourgeoisie — a construct that functioned to preserve oppressive structural arrangements. This construct also aligns, he argues, with the interests of colonized intellectuals and elites who benefited from those same structural arrangements, even as nonviolent tactics such as protests and boycotts allowed the general population “to let off steam.”⁸⁰

Though his argument echoes Trotsky in some ways, Fanon’s views on violence were more complex than Trotsky’s. Fanon saw violence not only as a means of overcoming oppressive structural arrangements. He also saw it as a means by which racially stigmatized and colonized minds achieve a profound psychic liberation. “For the colonized,” Fanon wrote, “violence is invested with positive, formative features.”⁸¹ It “mobilizes the people” and “pitches them in a single direction,” instills “common sense, national identity, and collective history into every consciousness” and thereby “unifies the people,” enabling them to transcend the regionalism and tribalism that prevent them from collectively overcoming the colonizer.⁸² “At the individual level,” Fanon also argues, “violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence.”⁸³ When liberation is achieved by these means, he asserted, “people realize that life is an unending struggle,” and they will be prepared, in turn, “to fight against poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment” in their newly liberated nations.⁸⁴ “Violence,” Fanon concludes, “can thus be understood as the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end.”⁸⁵

Despite the strength of these convictions, Fanon deplored violence. He embraced it only as a last resort, due to the failure of truth and reason in struggles for liberation.⁸⁶ And violence was only one of the

80 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 23, 28.

81 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 50.

82 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 50–51.

83 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 51.

84 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 51.

85 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 44.

86 Fanon, “Why We Use Violence: Address to the Accra Positive Action Conference, April 1960.”

revolutionary means he considered necessary. Fanon also recognized the need to construct radically new post-colonial societies, on native values and norms that, complemented by violent revolution, could supplant the colonial order.

Like Trotsky, the claims Fanon makes regarding the efficacy of violence are also deduced from theory — in this case, his synthesis of Marxist historical theory and psychoanalytic theory. Had Dewey lived to read Fanon's arguments, he might have pointed out, again, the value of a more pragmatic approach to learning about the effective means of social change. In this regard, it is important to note that Fanon's argument ignores the pragmatic success that had already been demonstrated by Gandhi in his nonviolent struggle to liberate India from colonialism. Nonetheless, Fanon's urgent and compelling argument enriched the discourse on ends and means and stimulated important new debates because it was motivated, as Homi Bhabha explains, by "a struggle for psycho-affective survival and a search for human agency in the midst of the agony of oppression."⁸⁷

Fanon made his argument for revolutionary violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* at the outset of a turbulent decade characterized by profound social and political ferment. Throughout that decade, that book was widely read, including its preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. "The colonized are cured of colonial neurosis by driving the colonist out by force," he wrote, and "once their rage explodes, they recover their lost coherence, they experience self-knowledge through reconstruction of themselves," for "killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free [...]"⁸⁸ "a man of higher quality."⁸⁹ In this context, he concludes, "Nonviolence... serves no other purpose but to put you on the side of the oppressors."⁹⁰

In the course of the turbulent decade that followed, these arguments influenced Che Guevara, Salah Khalaf, Fausto Reinaga, and many other anti-colonial intellectuals, activists, and revolutionaries around

87 Homi K. Bhabha, "Foreword: Framing Fanon," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), xxxvi.

88 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), lv.

89 Sartre, "Preface," lvii.

90 Sartre, "Preface," lviii.

the world. *The Wretched of the Earth* was also being widely read on university campuses in the U.S. and also, to some extent, in Europe. In the U.S., it influenced the thinking of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and many other influential activists for Black power and self-determination. Observing Fanon's influence within the U.S. civil rights movement, along with the associated rise of the Black power slogan, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an extended response to these developments in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*⁹¹

In this book, King demonstrates a deep sympathy for the underlying sentiments motivating these developments. Such sentiments included the growing disappointment, impatience, and frustration with the slowness of change and with ongoing White brutality, felt especially by young, working class, and often urban, Blacks. He also acknowledges the importance, conceptually and practically, of pursuing Black political power. Indeed, he points out, this has been a central focus of all of his years of activism. But he noted that the rhetoric of Black power was closely associated with a rejection of nonviolence. And he was concerned that this rhetoric and this rejection would unnecessarily divide the civil rights movement, be exploited by mass media looking to create a spectacle of such divisions, alienate potential White allies, provoke fear amongst the majority White population in the U.S., provide a political rallying cry that would promote even greater measures of racism, and thus lead to an overwhelmingly violent White backlash that reactionary Black violence could never hope to contend with, even at the level of self-defense.

King also argues that before the twentieth century, virtually all revolutions had been based on hope for freedom and justice, along with hate for the perpetrators of the old order, and that it was hate that led to violence. What the nonviolent movement offered was a new kind of revolution based on hope and love. Given the complete interdependence of Black and White in the U.S., he argues, Black freedom and justice could only be achieved by Blacks and Whites learning how to love, not hate, the other — as difficult as this would be. Violence and hate, he asserted, constitute a descending spiral. Because “darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only

91 Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).

love can do that."⁹²

This was not simply a moral or spiritual concern for King. It was also a pragmatic concern, or a concern about the effectiveness of the means. And, on this basis, King refused to be driven to the "Machiavellian cynicism" he saw entering the movement.⁹³ If we are concerned about Black power, he argues, we need to recognize that "nonviolence is power."⁹⁴

Finally, King points out that "one of the great paradoxes of the Black power movement is that it talks unceasingly about not imitating the values of White society, but in advocating violence it is imitating the worst, most brutal and most uncivilized value of American life."⁹⁵ With this point in mind, he then turns to Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, King points out, Fanon writes:

So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her.

Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature.

If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us.

But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries.

If we wish to live up to our peoples' expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe.

Moreover, if we wish to reply to the expectations of the people of Europe, it is no good sending them back a reflection, even an ideal reflection, of their society and their thought with which from time to time they feel immeasurably sickened.

For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.⁹⁶

"These are brave and challenging words," King notes, and "I am happy that young black men and women are quoting them." "The problem," he continues,

92 King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, 65.

93 King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, 61.

94 King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, 61.

95 King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, 66.

96 King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Fanon quoted by King, 67–68.

is that Fanon and those who quote his words are seeking “to work out new concepts” and “set afoot a new man” with a willingness to imitate old concepts of violence. Is there not a basic contradiction here? Violence has been the inseparable twin of materialism, the hallmark of its grandeur and misery. This is the one thing about modern civilization that I do not care to imitate.

Humanity is waiting for something other than blind imitation of the past. If we want truly to advance a step further, if we want to turn over a new leaf, and really set a new man afoot, we must begin to turn mankind away from the long night of violence.⁹⁷

A few years after King penned these words, Hannah Arendt offered another influential counterargument against violence as a means of pursuing social justice.⁹⁸ Arendt was an activist, historian, and philosopher who, as a young woman, had been a target of antisemitism in Germany. Having fled Germany during the rise of fascism and having witnessed so much of the twentieth century’s most cataclysmic violence, she went on to write about the human condition, the origins of totalitarianism, political revolutions, and violence.

Arendt’s critique of violence begins by echoing Dewey’s concern that the efficacy of any political means cannot be determined *a priori* merely from one’s theoretical commitments. The tendency to treat theories as though they were established facts, Arendt points out, results in “the inability or unwillingness to consult experience and to learn from reality” and an associated “disregard for the actual consequences of action.”⁹⁹ When such theories are employed as the strategic basis for political action, they “can lead us to believe we have an understanding of events and control over their flow which we do not have.”¹⁰⁰ In this context, Arendt asserts, the revolutionary Marxist theory of history, combined with Fanon’s psychoanalytic theory of decolonization, can lead to an empirically unfounded glorification of violence.¹⁰¹

The problems that arise from this, Arendt argues, are many. If violence is the ultimate means for psychically reconstructing the humanity of those who were previously the victims of violence, then “revenge would

97 King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, 68.

98 Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969).

99 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 42–43.

100 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 109.

101 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 116.

be the cure-all for most of our ills."¹⁰² In practice, however, this would likely lead to endless cycles of violence. Also, in the context of a world system that is already characterized by endemic violence, violent means "would not result in changing the world (or the system), but only its personnel."¹⁰³ Furthermore, the notion that anti-colonial violence will unify the Third World is, Arendt argues, as misguided as the notion that socialist revolutionary violence will unify the workers of the world. This is, in part, because the category of *Third World*, like the category *workers of the world*, "is not a reality but an ideology."¹⁰⁴ And it is in part because violence is not a sustainable unifying force. In this regard, Arendt points to Fanon's argument about the unifying effect of violent revolution among the colonized. This unifying effect, she argues, is "the well-known phenomenon of brotherhood on the battlefield, where the noblest, most selfless deeds are often daily occurrences."¹⁰⁵ The problem, she argues, is that "these experiences, whose elemental force is beyond doubt, have never found an institutional, political expression."¹⁰⁶ This is because "no human relationship is more transitory than this kind of brotherhood, which can be actualized only under conditions of immediate danger to life and limb."¹⁰⁷ "The hope that a new community together with a 'new man' will arise out of it," she concludes, "is an illusion."¹⁰⁸

Arendt also argues that Fanon, and some leaders of the Black power movement his thinking helped inspire, too easily conflate power with violence. In the political domain, she argues, "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert."¹⁰⁹ In this regard, she asserts, the basis of legitimate political power is the concerted will of the people. Violence, on the other hand, is employed to compensate for the absence of such power.¹¹⁰ Tyranny, she thus suggests, is the most violent and least powerful form of government, which is why colonialism relied so heavily on violence to enforce an always precarious control over subjugated populations. In this regard, "even the most despotic

102 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 122.

103 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 123, parentheses in the original.

104 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 123.

105 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 164.

106 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 165.

107 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 166.

108 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 166.

109 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 143.

110 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 145.

domination we know of, the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on superior means of coercion as such, but on a superior organization of power — that is, on the organized solidarity of the masters.”¹¹¹

In this sense, Arendt argues that “power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent” and, though “violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.”¹¹² According to this logic, real Black power can only be achieved through concerted political action at scale. In some cases, this may be achievable through conventional political means. But in many colonial and post-colonial contexts, it may require unconventional means such as concerted campaigns of civil disobedience, the efficacy of which Gandhi demonstrated, at least in the context of colonial powers organized as constitutional democracies. The real challenge, in such contexts, is achieving either form of concerted political action on a sufficient scale to effect transformative change. Toward this end, Arendt argues, violence offers a tempting but ultimately illusory short-cut.

Arendt qualifies her argument against violence by acknowledging that it is perfectly rational to use violence in self-defense, and it is also natural that the violent hypocrisies of colonialism would provoke a violent reaction among the colonized. And yet, she argues, this reactive violence loses its *raison d'être* when it becomes a proactive political strategy — or a means to a greater end.¹¹³ She thus concludes that “the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies”¹¹⁴ as “the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.”¹¹⁵

Of course, the arguments advanced by King and Arendt were contested at the time, and they have been contested in every subsequent generation by those who see a legitimate role for violence in the pursuit of social justice. In this context, one of the more significant concepts that has emerged is the radical flank effect. The concept of a radical flank was coined in the mid-1970s by Jo Freeman in her study of the

111 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 149.

112 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 155.

113 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 163.

114 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 106.

115 Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic*, 177.

women's movement through the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹¹⁶ She used it to describe segments of the movement that were perceived by many observers as extreme, in contrast to segments of the movement perceived as more moderate. The concept was subsequently elaborated by Herbert Haines and applied in his analysis of the civil rights movement.¹¹⁷ Haines argues that, overall, the movement benefited from a positive radical flank effect, because the perceived extremism of Black power militants functioned, by contrast, to strengthen the respectability and bargaining power of the movement's moderate wing. Others, however, have offered less positive interpretations of the impact Black militancy had on the movement.¹¹⁸

Radical flank effects are thus also contested.¹¹⁹ But a growing body of movement scholarship suggests a range of conditions that might be associated with either positive or negative radical flank effects.¹²⁰ Such

116 Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Longman Limited, 1975).

117 Herbert Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights: 1957-1970," *Social Problems* 32, no. 1 (1984); Herbert Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

118 David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2004); Doug McAdam, "The Framing Function of Movement Tactics: Strategic Dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, ed. Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Omar Wasow, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 (2020).

119 Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Kurt Schock and Erica Chenoweth, "The Impact of Violence on the Outcome of Nonviolent Resistance Campaigns: An Examination of Intermovement Radical Flank Effects" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Peace Research Association, Sydney, Australia, 2010).

120 Rune Ellefsen, "Deepening the Explanation of Radical Flank Effects: Tracing Contingent Outcomes of Destructive Capacity," *Qualitative Sociology* 41 (2018); Herbert Haines, "Radical Flank Effects," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, edited by David Snow, Donatella della Porta, Doug McAdam, and Bert Klandermans, 1-3 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022); Todd Schifeling and Andrew Hoffman, "Bill McKibben's Influence on U.S. Climate Change Discourse: Shifting Field-Level Debates Through Radical Flank Effects," *Organization & Environment* 32, no. 3 (2019); Dana Cloud, "The Significance of the Radical Flank: The Role of GetEQUAL in the Marriage Equality Movement," in *The Rhetoric of Social Movements: Networks, Power, and New Media*, ed. Nathan Crick (New York: Routledge, 2020); Holly McCammon and Erin Bergner, "'Are You One

conditions include the degree of polarization within the wider society regarding the issue at hand, the political strength of those who are the targets of movement activism, the positive momentum and degree of public sympathy a movement has generated before the radical flank emerges, and the degree to which moderates within a movement are able to distinguish themselves from the radical flank. Some of this depends, as well, on media representations and other factors that can be largely beyond a movement's control. Another factor is the nature of the confrontations fomented by a radical flank. Such confrontations might be characterized by rhetoric that is considered extreme, they might include acts of civil disobedience considered extreme, or they might include violence against property or against people. Movement scholars now tend to refer to the latter as a violent flank.¹²¹

Though contested, the idea that radical or violent flanks might have positive effects on a movement's advancement has contributed to the elaboration of a framework for action often referred to as diversity of tactics. The diversity of tactics framework is, at its core, an adaptation of the argument made by Fanon and popularized by Malcolm X that social justice should be pursued "by any means necessary."¹²² In this regard, Malcolm X argues that the movement for Black liberation should be characterized by unity at the level of the ends it sought, but diversity at the level of the means it employed, with the latter encompassing both nonviolent and armed forms of resistance. A similar logic was also

of Those Women?' Within-Movement Conflict, Radical Flank Effects, and Social Movement Political Outcomes," *Mobilization* 20, no. 2 (2015); Mark Sebastian Anner, "Labor's Radical Flank Mechanism in Central America," in *Solidarity transformed: Labor Responses to Globalization and Crisis in Latin America*, ed. Mark Sebastian Anner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Jan Jänte, Måns Lundsted, and Magnus Wennerhag, "When Do Radical Flanks Use Violence? Conditions for Violent Protest in Radical Left-Libertarian Activism in Sweden, 1997-2016," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 1 (2023); Brent Simpson et al., "Radical Flanks of Social Movements Can Increase Support for Moderate Factions," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) Nexus* 1, no. 3 (2022); Erin Evans, "Animal Advocacy and the 'Good Cop-Bad Cop' Radical Flanking of Laboratory Research," *Sociological Inquiry* 93, no. 3 (2023); Kirssa Cline Ryckman, "A Turn to Violence: The Escalation of Nonviolent Movements," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 2/3 (2020).

121 Erica Chenoweth, "The Role of Violence in Nonviolent Resistance," *Annual Review of Political Science* 26 (2023).

122 While Fanon's argument was previously discussed in this chapter, Malcolm X's widely cited argument can be found in Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

adopted by the Black Panther Party and others in the broader Black power movement.¹²³

This diversity of tactics argument continued to gain traction across movements of the New Left in the 1970s and beyond. For instance, it has been implicitly or explicitly adopted by some anti-Vietnam War activists, neo-Marxists, anarchists, anti-fascists, environmentalists and climate change activists, decolonization activists, anti-globalization activists, anti-capitalism activists, and Movement for Black Lives activists.¹²⁴ Proponents tend to argue that when movements embrace diverse tactics, they are more dynamic, synergistic, flexible, and responsive to changing opportunities and conditions; they attract and mobilize a wider range of participants by accommodating different moral commitments and risk tolerances and allowing every participant to choose how they want to contribute; they are less predictable and hence less easily countered by their opponents; and they apply greater overall pressure on the targets of their collective actions. Such proponents also tend to argue that the construct of nonviolence aligns with elite interests and that all of the iconic “nonviolent” movements of the past were, in fact, characterized by a diversity of tactics that included violence, but the violence has been whitewashed from dominant historical narratives.

On the other hand, opponents tend to argue that when the diversity of tactics employed by a movement encompasses violence against

123 Huey Newton, *To Die for the People* (San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 2009); Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

124 Max Chewinski and Catherine Corrigan-Brown, “Penalty or Payoff? Diversity of Tactics and Resource Mobilization Among Environmental Organizations,” *The American Behavioural Scientist* 66, no. 9 (2022); Clyde Barrow, “Marxist Political Theory, Diversity of Tactics, and the Doctrine of the Long Civil War,” *New Political Science* 14, no. 4 (2019); Nathan Schneider, “Diversity of Tactics,” in *Thank You, Anarchy*, ed. Nathan Schneider (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Janet Conway, “Civil Resistance and the Diversity of Tactics in the Anti-Globalization Movement: Problems of Violence, Silence, and Solidarity in Activist Politics,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41, no. 2/3 (2003); Ward Churchill and Michael Ryan, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (Binghamton, NY: PM Press, 2017); Peter Gelderloos, *How Nonviolence Protects the State* (Olympia, WA: Detritus Books, 2018); Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017); Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (London: Verso, 2021); Shon Meckfessel, *Nonviolence Ain’t What it Used to Be* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2016); Howard Zinn, *Disobedience and Democracy: Nine Fallacies on Law and Order* (New York: Random House, 1968).

property or people, it becomes counterproductive because it alienates potential allies and sympathizers and thus mobilizes fewer participants; it reinforces cycles of violence in the wider society or prefigures violent outcomes; it reflects a lack of disciplined action within a unified and coherent framework; and/or it violates deeper normative truths that are the ultimate foundation of individual human dignity and collective human flourishing. Opponents also tend to argue that violent means are unnecessary because nonviolent means can be equally effective or more effective.

When violence does erupt at the margins of predominantly nonviolent movements, some advocates of nonviolence argue such movements advance despite, rather than because of, the violent flank. In this regard, the concept of backfire (sometimes called backlash) is instructive.¹²⁵ When the state uses violent repression against citizens engaged in nonviolent collective actions, the attention it generates can raise awareness in the wider public about the repressive nature of the state. This can undermine the moral stature, legitimacy, and power of the state, while increasing the moral stature, legitimacy, and power of the movement. Thus, from a tactical standpoint, violent repression by the state can backfire. This insight is a centerpiece of some nonviolent tactics, and its efficacy has been demonstrated in many contexts. Gene Sharp referred to this as “political jiu-jitsu” because it entails using the strength of one’s opponent against them.¹²⁶ But when a violent flank erupts within an otherwise nonviolent movement, it can complicate public perceptions of the movement in ways that can weaken or neutralize a potential backfire effect.¹²⁷

Such concerns notwithstanding, the diversity of tactics framework remains popular. One of its most prominent contemporary theorists is the self-styled “conflictive anarchist” Peter Gelderloos.¹²⁸ Gelderloos

125 Martin Brian, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); David Hess and Brian Martin, “Repression, Backfire, and the Theory of Transformative Events,” *Mobilization* 11, no. 2 (2006); Kurt Schock, *Civil Resistance Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015).

126 Gene Sharp, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action: Political Jiu-Jitsu at Work* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973).

127 For an insightful empirical study of how violence can undermine the efficacy of a movement in this manner, see Wasow, “Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting.”

128 Peter Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence* (Olympia, WA: Detritus Books, 2021).

argues that nonviolence is “a more simplistic, less developed concept” than diversity of tactics because the former “posits a set of limitations over an entire social movement” based on “an immature abstraction in which a struggle is defined, bounded, and controllable.”¹²⁹ In contrast, he argues, “the concept of a diversity of tactics constitutes a qualitative expansion of thinking” because it recognizes the pluralistic, multiform, and uncontrollable characteristics of most social struggles.¹³⁰ In such struggles, he writes,

there is a need for a whole spectrum of activities. Recovering our connection with the land, publishing and spreading our ideas, debating, informing ourselves about the world and conflicts happening in different places, sabotaging development projects that harm our environment and ourselves, taking care of babies, the sick, and the elderly, feeding and healing ourselves, learning self-defense, educating ourselves, providing clothing and shelter, supporting prisoners, running social centers, presses, websites, and radio stations, creating a libertarian culture, learning how to share and exchange without a logic of accumulation, unlearning the roles that have been imposed on us, taking over spaces and defending them, being able to defeat the cops in the streets, shutting down the economy, attacking structures of domination, stopping evictions, organizing clinics and workshops, setting up safe houses and underground railroads, recovering our history, imagining other worlds, learning how to use weapons and the tools of sabotage, developing the capacity to subvert or withstand the military for when the government decides that democratic repression isn’t enough. The list goes on and on.

It does not matter in the least which of these activities are “violent” or “nonviolent.” It does matter that every person is uniquely suited to some of them and not to others, as a function of their temperament, their abilities, their experiences, and their ideas about revolution. In my vision of revolution, all of these activities are necessary.¹³¹

Thus, Gelderloos concludes, in contrast to the diversity of tactics framework, “nonviolence is a delusional idea.”¹³² Gelderloos’s conclusions about the means of social change, as with so many before him, are ultimately deduced from theory. In this case, it is the theory of society associated with his conflictive anarchism, which becomes

129 Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, 259.

130 Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, 259.

131 Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, 264–65.

132 Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, 260.

manifest throughout his argument. According to this theory, all forms of social hierarchy, including any form of movement hierarchy, are inherently oppressive. Similarly, “the state,” in any form, is inherently oppressive. Agonistic forms of collective social action are the primary means of fighting social hierarchies and the state. And a primary end of social change is the establishment of a maximally decentralized libertarian culture in which it is implicitly presumed that human goodness springs forth naturally once released from the shackles of social hierarchy and the state, enabling myriad forms of community life to be horizontally self-organized across the planet. Needless to say, there are many social justice activists and scholars who reject this anarchist theory of society as delusional.

Variations on the diversity of tactics theme also derive from other theoretical frameworks. What all such frameworks have in common is the underlying political “realism” discussed earlier in this chapter. Such realism is ultimately based on agonistic conceptions of power. Human history, when read narrowly, provides plenty of evidence that can be interpreted to support this conception. But human history, read more broadly, also provides evidence that can be interpreted to support an expanded conception of power. Such an expanded conception might include, for instance, the moral powers that protagonists of nonviolent social change have attempted to draw on, with varying degrees of success. These are the nonviolent powers alluded to by Gandhi’s conception of *satyagraha* — powers he saw as central objects of movement learning.¹³³

Another one of these objects of learning, alluded to previously, is the idea that the means of social change *prefigure* the ends. This idea is implicit in popular statements such as “violence begets violence,” and it informs the corresponding search for nonviolent ways to transcend the entrenched social patterns of violence. Or, more broadly, as Gandhi states,

They say “means are after all means”. I would say “means are after all everything”. As the means so the end... There is no wall of separation between means and end... Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means.¹³⁴

133 Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

134 Mohandas Gandhi, “An Appeal to the Nation (17-7-1924),” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: GandhiServe Foundation, 1999), 28, 310.

The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the ends as there is between the seed and the tree.¹³⁵

In the 1970s, socialist scholar Carl Boggs coined the terms prefigurative politics and prefiguration to denote the normative commitment to coherence between means and ends within a movement.¹³⁶ Nonviolence can be one prefigurative consideration, but there are many others. Ensuring that people from historically marginalized segments of society are fully represented in positions of movement leadership is another prefigurative consideration. Eliminating oppressive forms of hierarchy from movement organization is another. And more broadly, as Glen Sean Coulthard argues, the movement for decolonization “demands that we *enact* or *practice* our political commitments to Indigenous national and women’s liberation in the cultural form and content of our struggle itself. Indigenous resurgence is at its core a *prefigurative* politics — the methods of decolonization prefigure its aims.”¹³⁷

Thus, the need for coherence between means and ends, especially when it comes to nonviolence, is taken as an article of faith among social activists from many backgrounds. In the context of movement learning, however, the efficacy of prefigurative politics can be understood as a hypothesis that warrants testing over time. Until recently, most claims regarding the efficacy of prefigurative politics — and about nonviolence more generally — have been anecdotal. These include references to the relative success of Gandhi’s nonviolent strategy in India and to the relative success of other movements that applied nonviolent principles in other contexts, from the U.S. civil rights movement to the Color Revolutions of former Soviet states in Eastern Europe.

135 Mohandas Gandhi, “Hind Swaraj,” in *Gandhi: ‘Hind Swaraj’ and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1909]), 92–93. For a fuller discussion of Gandhi’s view that means prefigure ends, see Karuna Mantena, “Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics,” in *Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science*, #46 (Princeton, NJ: Institute for Advanced Study, 2012).

136 Carl Boggs, “Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power,” *Theory & Society* 4, no. 3 (1977); Carl Boggs, “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control,” *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (1977).

137 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 159.

Can Empirical Research Resolve the Debate?

The first substantive effort to study these matters empirically using statistical analysis was published in 2005 by Adrian Karatnycky, Peter Ackerman, and Mark Rosenberg.¹³⁸ Their study found that nonviolent campaigns are more likely to lead to durable and free democratic outcomes, which supports claims for the efficacy of nonviolence and its prefigurative potential.

In 2011, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan published findings from a much larger statistical analysis of the comparative efficacy of nonviolent means of social change.¹³⁹ Chenoweth and Stephan assembled a database of 323 movement campaigns that were pursuing “maximalist” political aims (e.g., regime change, expelling a foreign military occupation, secession) through violent and nonviolent means. Those campaigns occurred across diverse cultural and geographical contexts, from 1900 to 2006. (Since this initial study, this publicly available database has continued to expand. By 2020, it included 628 maximalist campaigns, which are now being studied by a growing number of researchers.)¹⁴⁰ Chenoweth and Stephan define violence as physical harm to people or property. Their initial study found campaigns that were primarily nonviolent were twice as successful as violent ones: 53% compared to 26%. (This comparative difference increased as the database was expanded and updated, as will be discussed below.) They also found that primarily nonviolent campaigns were just as likely to succeed against highly repressive regimes as they were against less repressive regimes. Furthermore, they found primarily nonviolent campaigns were more likely to usher in durable democratic outcomes when they succeeded — or were less likely to slip back into tyranny or civil war. These latter findings can be interpreted as another test of the prefigurative hypothesis.

Though their study could not get directly at the question of causality, Chenoweth and Stephan suggest a compelling interpretation of these

138 Adrian Karatnycky, Peter Ackerman, and Mark Y. Rosenberg, *How Freedom is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy* (New York: Freedom House, 2005).

139 Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*.

140 Erica Chenoweth, “The Future of Nonviolent Resistance,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020).

results. Nonviolent campaigns have been more successful, they argue, because they have been able to mobilize a larger and more diverse portion of the population. In this regard, every campaign they examined that mobilized at least 3.5% of the population was successful, and the only campaigns to pass that threshold were nonviolent ones. On average, the nonviolent campaigns tended to mobilize four times as many participants.

Chenoweth and Stephan offer compelling reasons nonviolent campaigns might be more effective at mobilizing people and why they may be more resilient as they pursue their aims: violence repels people who fear it, along with people who reject it for moral reasons. Violent campaigns also present more physical and practical barriers to participation, including health and fitness, or obligations to care for the young or the elderly. Thus, it is primarily young men who are successfully recruited for violent insurgencies, making the campaigns less numerous and less inclusive. Nonviolent campaigns also tend to be less secretive, safer to discuss openly in public, and easier to cover more favorably in the news. Hence, public awareness and sympathy tend to be greater, and it is easier to find out how to get involved. Violent campaigns have to rely on supplies of weapons, which can be difficult to obtain and hide, while nonviolent campaigns have no such limitations. For many of the preceding reasons, nonviolent campaigns are more likely to win over the moral sympathy of the police and the military, along with other pillars of power that unpopular regimes depend on. And when security forces are ordered by a regime to violently crack down on a large nonviolent demonstration, members of those security forces may be more reluctant to follow orders if they believe their own loved ones and acquaintances may be in the crowd. Or they may see the sheer numbers of people joining the movement and conclude they want to be on the right side of public opinion if the movement succeeds. After all, if 3.5% of a population is actively participating in movement actions, it is likely that a much larger percentage of the population tacitly supports the cause.

None of this means nonviolent campaigns are guaranteed to succeed. In the study by Chenoweth and Stephan, 47% of the nonviolent campaigns failed. Tellingly, all of those failed campaigns were unable to reach the 3.5% participation threshold. Nonetheless, Chenoweth

cautions against simplistic invocation of a 3.5% rule.¹⁴¹ She argues that other factors such as movement momentum building, organizational capacity building, strategic leadership, training, and resilience are undoubtedly as important as the percentage of popular participation. Also, recent research on a nonviolent campaign in Bahrain shows it failed with over 6% of the population participating, while some nonviolent campaigns have succeeded with less than 3.5% participation. Therefore, Chenoweth suggests that 3.5% is an approximate tendency, at best.

A follow-up study by Erica Chenoweth and Margherita Belgioioso suggests that campaigns can compensate for lower popular participation by increasing the concentration of their collective actions or their rate of momentum building, over time.¹⁴² Another follow-up study, by Erica Chenoweth, Andrew Hocking, and Zoe Marks, explored what specific strategies enable some nonviolent campaigns to succeed with lower levels of popular participation. That study suggests the most successful strategies are those that focus on undermining the loyalty of a regime's key pillars of support.¹⁴³

Chenoweth has also examined violent flank effects within primarily nonviolent movements.¹⁴⁴ Based on a meta-analysis of prior research, she argues that to study violent flank effects, one needs to develop more nuanced categorization schemes that go beyond simplistic violence/nonviolence binaries. A categorization scheme she offers as a starting point for more nuanced empirical research is between armed resistance, unarmed resistance, and nonviolent resistance. She defines armed resistance as a form of contentious collective action in which people carry and display lethal weapons for the purpose of physically attacking and harming their opponents. She defines unarmed resistance as a form of contentious collective action in which people do not carry

141 Erica Chenoweth, "Questions, Answers, and Some Cautionary Updates Regarding the 3.5% Rule," *Carr Center Discussion Paper Series*, no. 2020-005 (2020).

142 Erica Chenoweth and Margherita Belgioioso, "The Physics of Dissent and the Effects of Movement Momentum," *Nature: Human Behaviour* 3 (2019).

143 Erica Chenoweth, Andrew Hocking, and Zoe Marks, "A Dynamic Model of Nonviolent Resistance Strategy," *Plos One* 17, no. 7 (2022).

144 Chenoweth, "The Role of Violence in Nonviolent Resistance." See also Schock and Chenoweth, *The Impact of Violence on the Outcome of Nonviolent Resistance Campaigns: An Examination of Intermovement Radical Flank Effects*; Erica Chenoweth and Kurt Schock, "Do Contemporaneous Armed Challenges Affect the Outcomes of Mass Nonviolent Campaigns?," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2015).

or display lethal weapons, but unarmed resistance can erupt into spontaneous forms of unarmed violence such as vandalism, property destruction, rioting, or street fighting with improvised objects, such as stone throwing. And she defines nonviolent resistance as a form of contentious collective action in which nonviolent discipline is explicitly and deliberately maintained by movement leadership and by the vast majority of participants. With these distinctions in mind, one can see that a movement committed to nonviolent resistance could see the emergence of armed or unarmed violent flanks (or both). Violent flank studies need to disaggregate such effects. Chenoweth's initial efforts to do this find that armed violent flanks appear to reduce the chances for otherwise nonviolent movements to succeed, while unarmed violent flanks have more ambiguous effects.

Another recent study by Chenoweth suggests that the overall effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns has recently declined.¹⁴⁵ From 2010 to 2019, despite a vast increase in the overall number of such campaigns, fewer than 34% of them were successful. This is down from a 65% peak success rate in the 1990s. Chenoweth explores a number of explanations for this, including the possibility that targets of nonviolent actions are learning and becoming more sophisticated in their responses. For instance, targets may be increasingly learning the value of infiltrating movements to foment internal divisions or to foment violent flanks that make it easier to justify violent responses. But, based on existing empirical evidence, Chenoweth argues that the primary reasons for declining efficacy are internal to the movements themselves. One reason appears to be declining participation rates. In recent years, for reasons that are not clear, the percentage of a population that becomes actively engaged in nonviolent campaigns has, on average, declined. Another reason for declining efficacy appears to be over-reliance on protests and mass demonstrations in lieu of more disruptive tactics such as civil disobedience or general strikes, which are more complex and difficult to plan but more effective. And the shift toward leaderless movement structures in recent years appears to be a contributing factor in this regard, because leaderless structures not only make it more difficult to plan, they make it more difficult to agree on goals and

145 Chenoweth, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance." See also Jonas Holmberg, "The Decline in Success of Nonviolent Conflicts," *Pax et Bellum Journal* 10, no. 1 (2023).

tactics. Another reason appears to be over-reliance on digital organizing via social media, which can generate quick turnout for protests and mass demonstrations but sacrifices relationship building, grassroots organizing, training, strategic planning, and momentum building. In addition, digital communication is easily surveilled, is easily used to spread disinformation, and is easily used to rally counter-movement protests and demonstrations. A final reason for decreasing efficacy, Chenoweth argues, is the growing tolerance of violent flanks within the prevailing diversity of tactics framework, which can undermine popular support and provide an excuse for violent crackdowns.

Nonetheless, Chenoweth notes that the period experiencing this decline in success also experienced a vast global increase in the number of nonviolent campaigns, along with a decrease in violent ones. Moreover, the success rate of violent campaigns has declined faster than nonviolent ones. Historically, nonviolent campaigns were twice as successful as violent ones. From 2010 to 2019 they were four times as successful.

This pioneering body of research has, not surprisingly, attracted some critics. Foremost among these is the diversity-of-tactics advocate Peter Gelderloos. Pointing to the original study by Chenoweth and Stephan, upon which the subsequent body of research has been built, Gelderloos argues that its methodology and data are both flawed.¹⁴⁶ The study, he asserts, suffers from a lack of classificatory concept validity, a biased selection of cases, a tendency to ignore the presence of violence in allegedly nonviolent movements, a questionable definition of movement success, a tendency to ignore significant contextual factors affecting movement success, the use of statistics to obscure complex realities, and the use of pseudo-logical arguments to support the inferences they draw from their findings. Gelderloos further argues that the accolades this body of research has attracted and the influence it is now exerting on movement strategies and scholarship is due to its alignment with the interests of powerful elites — interests he believes are not threatened by nonviolent movements.

Such criticism notwithstanding, the pioneering work by Chenoweth

146 Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence*. Gelderloos's criticisms have been echoed by others, such as Alexei Anisin, "Debunking the Myths Behind Nonviolent Civil Resistance," *Critical Sociology* 46, no. 7/8 (2020).

and Stephan gave rise to an entire field of empirical research now being systematically advanced by numerous scholars of nonviolence, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, sharing their findings across a growing number of academic journals and university presses. Even as Chenoweth and Stephan's original database continues to grow, numerous complementary databases have also been developed.¹⁴⁷ And a growing number of activist training centers are emerging, which are drawing on practical insights generated through such research.

As the field advances both empirically and theoretically, it is also beginning to respond to criticisms by reflecting on prior assumptions and striving to advance more nuanced and complex studies.¹⁴⁸ Such studies are beginning to account for the heterogenous nature of many nonviolent movements, the challenge of achieving movement solidarity, and the tendency of movements to fragment; the internal disagreements movements tend to face around both goals and tactics; the complicating role played by ethnicity, class, partisanship, and other sources of in-group / out-group identities within movements; the complex relationship between movement escalation and repression; the political costs of nonviolent tactics and the often short-lived or disappointing nature of their alleged successes; the need to disaggregate immediate, medium-term, and long-term movement outcomes; and the often overlooked accomplishments of allegedly failed movements. Such studies are also beginning to recognize that nonviolent tactics cannot be exclusively associated with the political left. Similar tactics are increasingly being employed by the political right, sometimes as direct countermeasures to movements on the left, and all of this is occurring within a context of escalating political polarization and contentiousness that is global in scope.

147 Chenoweth and Stephan's original data set is *The Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes* (NAVCO) Data Project. Others include the *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, the *Nonviolent Tactics Database*, *Social Conflict Analysis Database*, the *Social Conflict in Africa Database*, the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset*, and the *Digital Library of Nonviolent Resistance*. These databases are complemented by resources such as the *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict's Resource Library* and the *Commons Social Change Library*.

148 See, for instance, Erica Chenoweth and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham (guest editors), "Special Issue on Nonviolent Resistance in an Age of Polarization," *Journal of Peace Research* 60, no. 1 (2023); Monika Onken, Dalilah Shemia-Goeke, and Brian Martin, "Learning from Criticisms of Civil Resistance," *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 7–8 (2021); Chenoweth, "The Role of Violence in Nonviolent Resistance."

The study of strategic nonviolent social change can thus be recognized as an increasingly sophisticated research program advancing within a conceptual framework that is being progressively clarified over time. But, as an empirical field of study, it is still in a relatively nascent stage of development, and its tentative conclusions will continue to be contested by skeptics operating within very different frameworks.

These ongoing debates should remind us of the theory-laden nature of all observations in processes of social learning. Dewey's pragmatic prescription for reflective processes of social learning, grounded in empirical observations of the consequences of actions, is compelling. But his prescription is complicated by the theory-laden nature of all observations. That is, the meaning of any given social action is not a self-evident characteristic of the action itself. Actions and their consequences have to be interpreted. And before they are even interpreted, the actions and consequences we foreground in our arguments have to be selected. Our selection and interpretation of social phenomena is thus always shaped, to some degree, by prior assumptions, concepts, and categories. Accordingly, all arguments for violent or nonviolent means have to initially be deduced, to some degree, from prior theoretical, philosophical, or moral frameworks. Hence the theory-laden nature of all observations, which is inseparable from the theory-laden nature of all attempts to interpret history.

The challenge of generating knowledge about the relative efficacy of violent and nonviolent means is thus inextricably bound up with the challenge of interpreting history. However, this need not lead to extreme relativism or subjectivism in the evolving discourse on ends and means. Over time, as initial assumptions and concepts are repeatedly tested against reality, communities that are operating in a learning mode can become increasingly attuned to significant aspects of reality, including basic truths about our social existence.¹⁴⁹ Part of what is required is a posture of humility. Another part of what is required is an effort to progressively refine the conceptual frameworks guiding our observations and interpretations. This is how the systematic generation of knowledge advances, not only across the formal sciences but across all complex processes of social learning.

149 Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020).

With this in mind, the aim of this chapter has not been to resolve, once and for all, the debate over violent and nonviolent means. Rather, the aim has been to bring into focus key arguments and considerations — along with their underlying assumptions and concepts — that will need to be accounted for as learning about the pursuit of social justice advances. Among the most salient of these, we believe, are the following, which we pose as a set of interrelated questions:

Is there a moral foundation to human existence? Stated another way, are there normative truths that govern human existence? If so, what normative principles should inform the means by which social justice is pursued? What are the pragmatic consequences of adhering to, or ignoring, such principles in the pursuit of social change?

Do the ends of social justice justify any means? Stated another way, should social justice be pursued through any means necessary? To what extent is this “realpolitik” effective? To what extent might some means offer the illusion of a short-cut to meaningful and lasting social change? Might we need to adopt a “new realism” based on a recognition that the means of social change prefigure the ends? If so, then to what extent might prefigurative politics entail the need for disciplined action within a unified and coherent framework?

To what extent can the means of transformative social change today be found by looking to the past? And to what extent do entirely new means need to be developed, informed by radically new concepts and approaches? For example, do we need to adopt a more expansive conception of power that informs an expanded repertoire of collective actions?

To what extent is the pursuit of social justice a matter of capturing the state or coercing the state to bend in response to popular will? What can be done if the structure of contemporary state institutions is inherently inclined toward injustice, regardless of who controls them? Might such structures need to be fundamentally changed? If so, by what means?

To what extent can an enlightened vanguard lead a meaningful process of social transformation, or to what extent does such transformation require, across an entire population, the development of critical consciousness coupled with a sense of historical agency? If the latter, what are the means of achieving this?

To what extent does social change require efforts to disrupt the

existing social order? What are the consequences of disrupting the social and economic processes entire communities have come to rely on for their livelihoods? To what extent is civil disobedience, and accepting the consequences of civil disobedience, effective at changing unjust laws? To what extent do meaningful processes of social change require suffering or sacrifice on the part of those pursuing such change?

To what extent might specific means of social change offer psychic liberation to oppressed populations? To what extent might specific means serve as a unifying force within a movement for change? To what extent might specific means contribute in formative ways to cultural change on the path toward social justice?

And how might social and historical context affect any of the preceding considerations?

Finally, it is worth noting that the moral and pragmatic considerations woven through the preceding questions may not be distinct considerations at all. To suggest there is a moral foundation to human existence is to suggest that collective human flourishing can only be achieved by discovering the latent normative principles that govern human existence and by learning how to apply these principles more systematically in efforts to construct a more just social reality.

5. Contention and Construction

As Chapter 4 illustrates, the discourse on means revolves partly around the widely recognized axis of violence and nonviolence. But there is a less widely recognized axis — that of contention and construction — to which we now turn our attention.

Contentious Politics

Most forms of collective action that have dominated the discourse on means over the past two centuries are contentious in nature — whether they are violent or nonviolent. Contentious means are conflictual and dramatic. They attract our attention and are the stuff of good stories. It is thus not surprising that contentious means dominate the narratives of social change told by political scientists, sociologists, historians, and the popular media.

But this narrative bias obscures a significant domain of change-oriented collective action, which we call constructive agency. We use the term “constructive” not to connote vague notions such as “positive,” “good,” “useful,” or “leading toward improvement.” Those connotations can all be associated with contentious means as well, depending on one’s interpretive framework, as we saw in Chapter 4. Rather, we use the term in its literal sense to denote purposefully building or constructing entirely new social forms — new patterns of community life, new social structures, and new institutional arrangements — in the pursuit of transformative change. It is in this sense that we refer to an axis of contention and construction in the discourse on means.

Though contentious means can be either violent or nonviolent, constructive means, as we employ the term, are inherently nonviolent. Neither are constructive means intended to provoke confrontation. Nonetheless, because they seek to transform society, they often become

a target of repression by vested interests seeking to maintain the status quo. Therefore, though constructive means of social change are both nonviolent and noncontentious, they can become the targets of violence and other forms of repression. Accordingly, they can entail various forms of suffering and sacrifice, much like their contentious counterparts. Movements of constructive social change thus require resilience, just like their contentious counterparts. However, before exploring these themes in more depth, we need to examine the more established and contrasting concept of contentious politics, along with the ways it has dominated movement discourse to date.

For many decades, different research programs have focused on distinct approaches to change that lie outside of conventional political processes and mechanisms. Such nonconventional means include protests and demonstrations, work stoppages and strikes, civil disobedience and occupations, property destruction and riots, armed insurgencies and revolutions, and even terrorism. In the 1990s, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, and other scholars called attention to an underlying commonality of all such phenomena, which they identified as contentious politics.¹ Contentious politics refers to any unconventional collective actions employing adversarial means to resist, confront, disrupt, or overthrow established social norms and structures, laws and policies, or governing regimes. With the articulation of this concept, this entire range of contentious phenomena is now sometimes viewed as a common research program.

Though sociologists and political scientists have only begun to think this way in the recent decades, hindsight suggests that the modern discourse on social and political change has always assumed that contentious means are its central objects of concern. Indeed, most of the arguments and practices examined in Chapter 4 — on both sides of violence/nonviolence axis — fall squarely within this observational,

1 Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Mark Beissinger, "Contentious Collective Action and the Evolving Nation State," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Eitan Alimi, "Repertoires of Contention," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

interpretive, and prescriptive frame. The implicit assumption has been that contentious politics is, at least in many contexts, the only realistic way to pursue social justice.²

Such arguments are often premised on the assumption that powerful elites who control political outcomes — in autocracies as well as democracies — will never willingly give up their unjust privileges. Rather, such privileges have to be taken from them against their will, and this requires contentious means that lie beyond the conventional political mechanisms elites largely control. In this argument we hear the echo of Frederick Douglass's words, cited in Chapter 4, that "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."³

Though this argument sounds compelling and may be valid in some contexts, it obscures an entire category of collective action that may prove to be an equally effective — perhaps more effective — means of pursuing social justice in many contexts. Given that we devoted all of Chapter 4 to violent and nonviolent contentious politics, we turn now toward this widely overlooked category of means.

Constructive Programs

In 1908, Carl Thompson, a prominent Christian socialist and political organizer from Wisconsin, published a booklet titled *The Constructive Program of Socialism*. In that booklet, Thompson lays out a vision of democratic socialism to be established not by sudden, violent, or revolutionary means but through steady processes of evolutionary change.⁴ Toward this end, he envisions three primary lines of action: political organizing, trade union organizing, and organizing co-operative societies. He describes these combined efforts as the "constructive program" of the socialist movement. The aim of his booklet was to outline advances that were already being made along these lines in various democratic societies and to chart a path forward.

2 See, for example, Clarissa Rile Hayward, "Responsibility and Ignorance: On Dismantling Structural Injustice," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017); Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

3 Frederick Douglass, *A Runaway Slave from Baltimore: The Writings and Speeches of Frederick Douglass* (Bristol: Read & Co. Books, 2020), 192.

4 Carl Thompson, *The Constructive Program of Socialism* (Milwaukee, WI: Social-Democratic Publishing Co, 1908), 9.

Following Thompson's initial use of this concept and its circulation in some socialist circles, Mohandas Gandhi began to employ and elaborate the concept in his evolving philosophy of nonviolent change. By 1941, Gandhi published his own booklet titled *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*.⁵ Gandhi's vision of a constructive program was more radical than Thompson's. Thompson envisioned socialism gradually capturing the Western-liberal state through democratic means and rooting out its capitalist tendencies while building other economic arrangements and complementary civil society organizations. Gandhi, however, envisioned the construction of an entirely new kind of state resting on an entirely new kind of social order that constituted a fundamental departure from the cultural assumptions of Western civilization.⁶

Though Gandhi was focused on India, his conception of a constructive program was a universally relevant concept that could take different forms in different contexts. In the Indian context, he argues the constructive program would need to focus, at least initially, on a range of endeavors specific to India. These included overcoming conflict among the diverse religions of India (which was exploited by the British to divide and conquer) by establishing communal unity; removing untouchability as a caste; re-establishing Indian textile production and distribution through a decentralized system of universal participation and promoting other village industries; developing a widespread system of labor unions, establishing economic equality, and achieving equality for women; providing universal basic education, including adult education; valuing provincial languages while establishing a shared national language; promoting village sanitation, education in health and hygiene, the avoidance of intoxicants and narcotics, and care for lepers; and empowering the peasantry, lower castes, the aboriginal peoples of India, and college students to become full protagonists in the constructive program and full partners in the future social order.⁷

Gandhi understood that all of these things could be accomplished by Indians even under the oppressive rule of the British Raj. And by

5 Mohandas Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1941).

6 Anthony Parel, *Pax Gandhiana: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

7 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*.

accomplishing these things, he argues, Indians would make the British Raj irrelevant. As he explains,

The constructive programme is the truthful and non-violent way of winning Poorna Swaraj [total self-rule]. Its wholesale fulfilment is complete Independence. Imagine all the forty crores of people [400 million] busying themselves with the whole of the constructive programme which is designed to build up the nation from the very bottom upward. Can anybody dispute the proposition that it must mean complete Independence in every sense of the expression, including the ousting of foreign domination?⁸

Gandhi thus saw the constructive program as the primary means of achieving Indian self-rule. He described civil disobedience only as a secondary aid to it.⁹ In fact, he argues that civil disobedience would not even be necessary if the cooperation of the whole nation could be secured and focused on the constructive program.¹⁰ He also asserted that civil disobedience in the absence of the constructive program “is mere bravado and worse than useless.”¹¹ He explains that “outward agitation cannot be given the first place. It is of subsidiary importance and it depends for its success entirely on the success of that which is internal, viz. constructive work.”¹²

Gandhi also rejected the vanguardism that had become popular among the revolutionary socialists of his day, such as Lenin and Trotsky. The constructive program, he argues, “must not be imposed upon the people, but it must be intelligently and willingly accepted by them.”¹³ He also recognized that grassroots training would be essential for the success of the constructive program, so that its myriad diverse protagonists could advance their efforts in intelligent, disciplined, and coherent ways.¹⁴ Finally, he saw the need for resilience, because he anticipated efforts to repress or defeat the constructive program.¹⁵ “Such

8 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, iii.

9 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, iii.

10 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, 21.

11 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, 22.

12 Gandhi, “My Notes (30-8-1925),” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: GandhiServe Foundation, 1999), 362–63.

13 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, iv.

14 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, iii. See also Gandhi’s discussion of these themes in Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance: Satyagraha*.

15 Many others have since examined the theme of resilience in movements for social

programmes can be obstructed," he wrote, so its protagonists will "have to go through the fire of suffering" — for "there is no Swaraj [self-rule] without suffering."¹⁶

Despite Gandhi's repeated arguments about the centrality of the constructive program, his efforts to advance it were ignored by many of his peers in the Indian National Congress, who preferred to focus on political organizing and direct confrontation actions in the struggle for independence. Similarly, in the half-century that followed Indian independence, when Gandhi's nonviolent repertoire was adapted by the U.S. civil rights movement and many other movements around the world, his arguments about the centrality of the constructive program were minimized or forgotten.

For example, Gene Sharp's encyclopedic work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* was largely inspired by the success of Gandhi's nonviolent campaigns and the subsequent adaption of his methods outside India.¹⁷ Yet Sharp does not devote a single chapter of this fourteen-chapter, eight-hundred-page, three-volume text to the constructive program. The text focuses almost exclusively on contentious nonviolence. It contains only a handful of scattered references to constructive works, all of which minimize their centrality in Gandhi's thought.

According to Sharp, Gandhi believed the constructive program "was a necessary accompaniment to all nonviolent action struggles except in cases of a local specific common grievance."¹⁸ Yet this assertion inverts Gandhi's understanding of the relationship between the constructive program and contentious politics. For Gandhi, the constructive program was clearly primary. It was not a mere accompaniment to contentious nonviolence.

change. See, for example, Kurt Schock, "The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance," *Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013); Michael Sabet, ed., *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies: Special Issue on Constructive Resilience* 30, no. 3 (2020); Jason MacLeod, "Building Resilience to Repression in Nonviolent Resistance Struggles," *Journal of Resistance Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015).

16 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, iv. Many others have since examined the theme of resilience in movements for social change. See, for example, Schock, "The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance."

17 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Extending Horizons Books, 1973).

18 From volume three of Sharp's three-volume work, *The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973), 797.

Gandhi also warned that contentious nonviolence runs the risk of stirring up oppositional passions among its practitioners, which can spiral out of control.¹⁹ Such passions run counter to the normative principles undergirding Gandhi's philosophy such as love, respect, and compassion for all. Such passions also run counter to Gandhi's view that the existence of an oppositional "other" is an illusion, or an untruth, within the interdependent body of humanity.²⁰ Furthermore, Gandhi understood that when oppositional passions are initially aroused by contentious nonviolence, they easily devolve into violence — and he directly observed this in the Indian struggle for independence. Finally, Gandhi understood that contentious nonviolence, like violence, could be prefigurative. In this regard, his constructive program was aimed at creating new patterns of social life and new institutional arrangements founded on the principles of cooperation and solidarity, and he was concerned that over-reliance on contentious means would compromise and distort those ends. That is, they would lead India to replicate the ways Western civilization is structured around the conflictual pursuit of self-interests, which he deplored.

With concerns such as these in mind, as Gandhi formulated and clarified his ideas about the constructive program, he came to view campaigns of contentious nonviolence as something that were necessary only because he was unable to rally enough of the Indian population behind his constructive program. Contentious politics was thus a last resort rather than a preferred method.

Nonetheless, when Sharp identified "198 methods of nonviolent action" in his encyclopedic text, only seven could be considered aspects of a constructive program.²¹ These were establishing new social patterns (#174), alternative social institutions (#179), alternative communication system (#180), alternative markets (#190), alternative transportation

19 See discussions of this theme in Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012); Karuna Mantena, "Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics," in *Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science*, #46 (Princeton, NJ: Institute for Advanced Study, 2012); Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi, the Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 39 (2003).

20 See discussions of this theme in William Starosta and Lili Shi, "Alternate Perspectives on Gandhian Communication Ethics," *China Media Research* 3, no. 4 (2007).

21 From volume two of Sharp's three-volume work, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action: Political Jiu-Jitsu at Work*.

systems (#191), alternative economic institutions (#192), and dual sovereignty and parallel government (#198). But these seven methods were scattered across three different categories of methods — social interventions, economic interventions, and political interventions — which were all primarily contentious. And Sharp even framed these seven methods in largely contentious terms, as means of disrupting existing social systems. Had Sharp organized his methods according to Gandhi's logic, those seven methods would have been assigned to their own category — the constructive program category — whose logic would have been clearly articulated and whose relationship to all contentious methods would have been made clear.

None of this would matter if Sharp had not been such an influential theorist, champion, and global propagator of nonviolent action. But he was. And his subsequent books — *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, *How Nonviolent Struggle Works*, and *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* — also make little mention of constructive programs.²² To his credit, Sharp did write one short essay on Gandhi's constructive program. And in this essay, he offered an insightful analogy:

If a person's house is in dangerous condition, inadequate, and its foundations are shattered, then he or she needs to build a new one. Mere patchwork on it will not be sufficient. Simply tearing down the old building is not enough. Nor will an appeal to someone to abandon a dangerous structure be heeded if there is nowhere else to live. It is difficult to persuade the person who has no safe bedroom to sleep in the snow rather than remain in the old room which might — but only *might* — collapse in a storm.

Instead, while the old house still exists, the wise person will lay the foundation of the new one, raise the framework and walls, lay the roof, and then complete one room after another, perhaps even reusing suitable materials and fixtures from the old house in the new structure.

The person will then have a place to live during the construction (assuming none other is available). As the new structure rises, and is ready for occupation, it is possible to withdraw from section after section of the old one, which finally stands deserted and unneeded. The

22 Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2002); Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers, 2005); Gene Sharp, *How Nonviolent Struggle Works* (Boston, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2013).

new improved way to meet the need for shelter has made it possible to abandon the old structure.

No longer of use, the old weak structure can be dismantled. The new, strong house remains, still needing refinement and finishing touches, but structurally capable of providing safe shelter and withstanding what storms may come.²³

Nonetheless, Gandhi's views on the centrality of the constructive program received little attention for a half a century after he was murdered by a Hindu nationalist. His murder, along with the sectarian blood bath and forced mass migrations that followed in its wake, embodied the oppositional passions Gandhi saw being stirred up through India's contentious struggle for independence — passions he had hoped to temper by elevating the constructive program over the contentious one.

Though this aspect of Gandhian praxis was largely eclipsed for half a century, expressions of constructive agency within movements for social justice can clearly be found during that period. For instance, in the U.S., the civil rights movement embodied many such expressions. Bayard Rustin, one of the chief visionaries and strategists of the movement, wrote explicitly about the need for a constructive program to ensure the success of the movement.²⁴ Along these lines, Septima Clark, one of the greatest educators and organizers of the movement, established a vast network of citizenship schools that taught adult literacy, educated people about their rights, empowered them to overcome Jim Crow voting barriers, and empowered them to become protagonists of social change. Through her constructive efforts, over nine hundred citizenship schools were raised up across the U.S. South, and over ten thousand local teachers were raised up for this work.²⁵ Many other elements of a constructive program could be seen in the Southern civil rights movement, such as the Freedom Farm Cooperative founded by Fannie

23 Gene Sharp, "The Theory of Gandhi's Constructive Program," in *Gandhi as a Political Strategist: Essays on Ethics and Politics* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1997), 80–81.

24 Bayard Rustin, "Working Papers," in *Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Document Collection Center*, <https://documents.law.yale.edu/working-papers>

25 Elaine Weiss, *Spell Freedom: The Underground Schools That Built the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Atria/One Signal Publishers, 2025); Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

Lou Hamer. This cooperative enabled Black families to pool their resources and purchase land for collective farming; fostered a wide range mutual aid programs focused on housing, education, and health services; and became a model for the modern food security and food justice movements.²⁶ Similarly, across the country, the Black Panthers developed programs offering community health clinics, educational opportunities for youth and adults, breakfasts for school children in need, and other constructive endeavors.²⁷

The aforementioned examples are part of deeply rooted historical patterns in the African American community of working to construct a more just social order. Such efforts led to the construction of schools and colleges, churches and hospitals, businesses and banks, economic cooperatives and associations of mutual aid, agricultural enterprises, and newspapers and libraries, as well as world-shaping cultural forms and artistic expressions — all of which sought to confer dignity on, and create opportunities for, Black lives.²⁸ These efforts can all be viewed as elements of a constructive program inasmuch as they sought to construct new patterns of Black community life and new structures to support

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- 26 Monica White, "'A pig and a garden': Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farms Cooperative," *Food and Foodways* 25 (2017); Priscilla McCutcheon, "Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms and Black Agrarian Geographies," *Antipode* 51, no. 1 (2019).
 - 27 David Hilliard, ed., *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008); Stephen Shames and Ericka Huggins, *Comrade Sisters: Women of the Black Panther Party* (New York: Acc Art Books, 2022); Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016).
 - 28 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); Monica M. White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Bobby Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges & Universities* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015); Hannibal Johnson, *Black Wall Street* (Fort Worth, Texas: Eakin Press, 1998); Mike Selby, *Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2019); Irvin Hunt, *Dreaming the Present: Time, Aesthetics, and the Black Cooperative Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Todd Vogel, ed., *The Black Press* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2001); Robert Woodson Sr., *Red, White, and Black: Rescuing American History from Revisionists and Race Hustlers* (Brentwood, TN: Emancipation Books 2021); Robert Woodson Sr., *A Pathway to American Renewal: Red, White, and Black Volume II* (Brentwood, TN: Emancipation Books 2024).

them. Such work entailed heroic struggles under oppressive conditions, along with heroic forms of resilience in the face of often violent efforts by segments of the White population to repress or destroy many of these accomplishments.²⁹

Despite these profound expressions of constructive agency, dominant narratives of the African American struggle for social justice have, until recently, tended to minimize or obscure these constructive aspects of the struggle, focusing instead on the contentious politics of the civil rights and Black power movements, which make for dramatic storytelling with readily identifiable heroes and villains. However, when the longer historical struggle is viewed through a constructive program lens, its full dimensions become clear.

Similarly, when the long historical struggle for the advancement of women is examined through the lens of constructive agency, along with the distinctive contribution many women have made to broader struggles for social justice, a rich story emerges. The widely overlooked story of constructive agency exercised by countless women in the U.S. civil rights movement, which was alluded to above, is but one example.

Another example can be seen in the U.S. settlement movement of the early twentieth century, which was largely led by women, including Jane Adams, Ellen Gates Star, Mary Rozet Smith, Mary Keyser, Alice Hamilton, Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, and Ella May Dunning Smith.³⁰ This movement's broad aim was to bring people into closer physical and social proximity across class lines in ways that would lead to the alleviation of poverty through the sharing of cultural capital, the collective establishment of basic social services, the construction of new patterns of community life, and the pursuit of associated policy reforms. This was accomplished partly through the development of settlement houses and settlement schools in impoverished neighborhoods and communities. It was also accomplished through the development of

29 See, for example, Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003); Edward González-Tennant, *The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2019).

30 Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Domenica Barbuto, *American Settlement Houses and Progressive Social Reform: An Encyclopedia of the American Settlement Movement* (New York: Greenwood, 1999).

a form of community action research known as settlement sociology, which partly inspired subsequent community-engaged action research movements. Through means such as these, the movement played a significant role in uplifting the condition of poor immigrant communities in a number of urban centers, as well as among the rural poor in regions such as Appalachia.

Beyond the U.S., remarkable expressions of constructive agency can be seen in the story of women such as Wangari Maathai from Kenya, who led the Green Belt Movement that mobilized armies of women to plant trees, restore local environments, and avert land grabs and political oppression.³¹ Similarly, it can be seen in the story of Vandana Shiva from India, who led the Navdanya movement to protect seed sovereignty, promote organic farming and fair trade, and support development among small-scale women farmers in the struggle for food justice.³² And it can be seen in the story of Maria Montessori from Italy, who developed an innovative educational approach for allegedly “uneducable” children, which turned out to be highly effective for children from all backgrounds and which was founded on values that actively promoted peace and justice. This led to the construction of a worldwide network of Montessori schools that, in turn, inspired an even wider educational movement toward student-centered, active, and empowering learning modalities.³³ These few examples stand in for the countless women whose stories are often overlooked and whose constructive agency has advanced the cause of social justice.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, many nonviolent activists and scholars began paying closer attention to the role constructive agency and constructive programs must play in struggles for social justice. This was inspired, in part, by a belated recognition in the Western world of the central role Gandhi had placed on the constructive program. Among the first to elaborate this theme in the West was Michael Nagler who, in 2001,

31 Namulundah Florence, *Wangari Maathai: Visionary, Environmental Leader, Political Activist* (New York: Lantern, 2014); Wangari Maathai, *Green Belt Movement* (New York: Lantern Books, 2004).

32 Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016); Krishna Mallick, *Environmental Movements of India: Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Navdanya* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

33 E. M. Standing, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (New York: Plume, 1998); Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002).

drew a distinction between what he called constructive and obstructive programs of nonviolent action.³⁴ Nagler examines how the seeds of the former were planted in Gandhi's thinking as early as his South African campaigns in the 1890s, became firmly rooted in his Indian campaigns by the 1920s, and become his central commitment by the 1940s. Indeed, Gandhi became so confident in the power of the constructive program that he asserted India could achieve full independence in only one year *if* the Indian population would dedicate itself completely to the constructive program. However, as Nagler explains, this prescription "was so simple that almost no one got it."³⁵

Two years later, Jonathan Schell also elaborated some of Gandhi's thinking about the constructive program — or what Schell called constructive noncooperation.³⁶ As Schell noted, Gandhi understood that India was oppressed not only by the British Raj, but also by deep social ills that predated, and would outlast, the British. Gandhi saw the constructive program as a means for addressing both sources of oppression simultaneously. In contrast, many of his peers within the Indian National Congress wanted to first wrestle political power from the British and only then attempt to address India's endemic social problems. Gandhi argues for the opposite. Political power, he asserted, is not an end in itself. It is only one of the means that can potentially enable people to pursue the end of improving the real conditions of their lives. Thus, as political power is being pursued, the constructive program should also be pursued. And the latter can advance independently of the former. Indeed, Gandhi argues that the real basis of political power could only be generated through the constructive program.

Within a decade of Nagler and Schell, other activists and scholars began to further explore the implications of these ideas. For instance, inspired by Gandhi's view that nonviolent social change was a nascent science, Mark Mattaini and Kristen Atkinson called for the systematic generation of knowledge about constructive programs, which were still the least understood aspect of nonviolent praxis.³⁷ Toward this

34 Michael Nagler, *Is There No Other Way? The Search for a Nonviolent Future* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 2001).

35 Nagler, *Is There No Other Way? The Search for a Nonviolent Future*, 181.

36 Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003).

37 Mark Mattaini and Kristen Atkinson, "Constructive Noncooperation: Living

end, they suggested the value of adopting a conceptual framework derived from the study of complex dynamic systems. Social systems, they explain, emerge in part from the organization and repetition of simple processes and patterns over time. Constructive programs shape and sustain desirable processes and patterns in this way. In contrast, obstructive programs attempt only to suppress undesirable processes and patterns. Thus, they argue, the latter is not a sufficient approach to lasting social change. Constructive programs are needed. The most effective constructive programs, they also argue, will be those that foster new processes and patterns at the level of individuals, institutions, and communities. At the individual level, this entails a Gandhian commitment to satyagraha, or holding firmly to the truth, in one's everyday life. Václav Havel, they note, called this "living in truth."³⁸ At the institutional level, this entails the development of what Gene Sharp called parallel institutions, which can become as alternatives to existing institutions.³⁹ At the community level, this entails the cultivation of new cultural patterns based on new values and social practices. Advancing applied knowledge on all of these levels, they argue, will empower us to address the root causes of social problems.

Around the time that Mattaini and Atkinson were proposing a complex systems framework for the empirical study of constructive programs, Karuna Mantena began elucidating the underlying logic of such programs as part of an effort to rectify political philosophy's tendency to focus on ends while ignoring the problem of means.⁴⁰ Mantena argues that Gandhi, more than most other twentieth century thinkers, understood that the problem of means was a central problem of political life.

As Mantena demonstrates, Gandhi believed that contentious politics inherently led to moral erosion, conflict escalation, and violence. He viewed these as predictable consequences of human psychology because

in Truth," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011); Kristen Atkinson and Mark Mattaini, "Constructive Noncooperation as Political Resistance," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 24 (2013); Mattaini, *Strategic Nonviolent Power: The Science of Satyagraha*.

38 Václav Havel, *Living in Truth*, ed. Jan Vladislav (London: Faber & Faber, 1978).

39 Sharp, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action: Political Jiu-Jitsu at Work*.

40 Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence."; Mantena, "Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics."

political contestation is never simply a contest of material interests. It is also a contest of subjectivities — or a contest of deeply held beliefs, values, egos, and identities. On this subjective level, criticism and opposition tend to provoke emotional impulses such as indignation, resentment, self-righteousness, anger, fear, and humiliation. Such impulses tend to result in ideological entrenchment, dogmatism, and hubris. They also give rise to moral insults, dehumanization, fearmongering, hostility, and bravado. All of these conditions, Gandhi recognized, tend to set in motion antagonistic cycles of escalation, incitement, and retaliation — or reactions and counter-reactions that feed egoistic passions and can spiral into violence. And all of this tends to be reinforced by the way contests of power breed personal ambition, which can be advanced by fanning the flame of such passions in one's political base.

Given his insights into the social psychology of political contestation, Gandhi sought to formulate means that would quiet the ego and calm its passions, foster humility in one's own views, foster respect for the other, nurture moral character and courage, and cultivate self-discipline within a framework of nonviolent collective actions. In this regard, he understood contentious nonviolence as an imperfect, yet sometimes necessary, means. He hoped that when contentious nonviolence is approached in a thoughtful and disciplined manner, its most harmful tendencies could be limited as it contributed to the advancement of a movement. Yet he saw the constructive program as an even more efficacious means because it transcended contentious politics entirely. Thus, to the extent contentious nonviolence was necessary, he believed it had to advance alongside a constructive program that would train its protagonists in the deeper logic of nonviolence and serve as a bulwark against the pull of egoistic passions and the harmful spiral they led to.

Though many have dismissed Gandhi's views as naïve idealism, Mantena argues his views are grounded in acute political realism. Political realism, she explains, accepts that which is given — that which is immutable and endemic — in human nature and in politics. In the Western liberal tradition, prevailing notions of realism assume that egoistic passions are a given and that attempts to suppress or rectify such deeply rooted human motivations are foolhardy. The prevailing Western liberal view, therefore, is that political institutions need to take such motivations into account, restrain their most dangerous excesses

through coercive means when necessary, and otherwise harness egoistic impulses to the greater good through rational processes of political contestation over the ends sought by different interest groups.

Gandhi viewed this as naïve. Institutions organized around political contestation over ends, he believed, could never restrain or harness egoistic passions in these ways. Rather, such passions — which Gandhi also viewed as given — have to be moderated in communities of practice through the cultivation of purposeful, disciplined, constructive, and efficacious forms of collective action that tap into other equally real, but often latent, powers of the human spirit. And it only becomes possible to begin learning how to do this when the question of means is taken as the fundamental question of politics. This, Mantena argues, was Gandhi's realism. And the constructive program was its central object of learning.

A few years after Mantena brought into focus these long-overlooked aspects of Gandhian thought, Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen advanced an argument that helps explain why Western activists and scholars have paid so little attention to Gandhi's constructive program.⁴¹ Following Gandhi, they argue, the theory and practice of nonviolent social change was reshaped by a Euro-American worldview with three major ideological biases. The first of these is a disproportionate focus on contentious politics, which obscures the importance of constructive politics. The second is a disproportionate focus on the strategic rationality of nonviolent methods, which obscures the importance many protagonists of social change place on strengthening the dignified subjectivity of the protagonists themselves. In other words, within the dominant Western worldview, nonviolent methods tend to be understood instrumentally, as nonviolent weapons for prevailing over others in political contests. But this understanding can be at odds with the principled commitments, relational worldviews, and spiritual sensibilities that give meaning to the lives of many people around the world, leading to different expressions of political agency and subjectivity. The third bias is a tendency to project a Western vision regarding the ends of human emancipation — a vision of Western liberal democracy with its associated political and economic arrangements — as the universal aim of struggles for social justice. This projection

41 Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen, "Decolonizing Civil Resistance," *Mobilization An International Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2015).

ignores other meaningful, plausible, and compelling visions of a more just social order.

In light of these biases, Chabot and Vinthagen call for the “decolonization” of nonviolent theory and practice. They argue that the discourse needs to be enriched by other moral visions and informed by other systems of knowledge; that its objects of learning should include all potential means of social transformation, including constructive means; and that many different stories of nonviolent social change are possible — indeed many already exist — but we need to recognize them as such in order to learn from them.

Another significant contribution to understanding constructive programs has been offered by Mona Lilja. Lilja brings into focus the importance of contributing to discourse as an essential aspect of constructive programs seeking to transform social realities.⁴² Social realities are constructed, in part, through systems of meaning and representation — the cultural coded ways we think and talk that inform our values, feelings, attitudes, practices, and institutions. Systems of meaning and representation are created and recreated through discourse. Broadly understood, discourse encompasses the language we use, the concepts and categories we employ, the assumptions we make, the metaphors we invoke, the images we circulate, the stories we tell, the truth claims we advance, the interpretive frames we share, and so forth. In this sense, discourse is a field within which human subjectivities are constituted. This occurs through repetitions, through struggle, and through creative contributions, over time. Contributing to the evolution of discourse can thus be understood both as an act of resistance and as a powerful expression of constructive agency.

The ubiquitous nature of constructive agency has also been illuminated by a remarkable study of the organic patterns of activity that can emerge among innocent civilians engulfed by the mass violence of war. In *A Different Kind of War Story*, Carolyn Nordstrom documents the many creative, adaptive, and altruistic expressions of constructive agency that constituted the primary agency of ordinary people engulfed in one of the most brutal wars of the late twentieth century. This was the Mozambican Civil War between 1977 and 1992 that claimed almost

42 Mona Lilja, *Constructive Resistance: Repetitions, Emotions, and Time* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

a million civilian lives, destroyed the country's infrastructure and economy, and forced one third of the population to flee their homes. As with most wars, the dominant narratives regarding this conflict were stories of the violence carried out by the tiny fraction of the population that took up arms. Yet Nordstrom's ethnographic observations within the war zone tell a very different story. In her own words:

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this research to me was the tremendous creativity average people employed in surviving and working to resolve the war in Mozambique... most people were actively dedicated to rebuilding their lives and societies, working with others to find solutions to the deprivations of war, and instituting conflict resolution measures at the local level... it is, in my experience, one of the most sophisticated mechanisms of asserting personal agency and political will in the face of intolerable repression... Society and culture were sculpted from the ground up... This creativity, this worldbuilding in the face of violent onslaught, is not a simple thing. It involves life-threatening risks and involves courage and skill.⁴³

Nordstrom attributes this, in part to the population's creative imaginary — a collective cognitive power that exists in every human community. She asserts that this power is as real and as coherent as the empirical perceptions offered by our physical senses.⁴⁴ Without any institutional support, the Mozambican population drew on this creative imaginary to build social linkages across no-man's-lands; to establish services to find lost and kidnapped family members and find homes for orphans; to develop means of caring for the wounded, the maimed, the dislocated, and the impoverished; to institute healing ceremonies and classes for the traumatized; to organize informal food exchange programs, markets, and resource centers; to set up dispute resolution committees and ways of reducing tensions between tribal groups; to develop communication networks that informed people about attacks, troop movements, political developments, and safe zones; to set up classes for the ongoing education of children; and to create new trade routes for essential goods across distances. Thus,

in a society bereft of the normal institutions that supposedly regulate

43 Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 12–13.

44 Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, 201–02.

society and moral norms, people, for the most part, engage in humane worldbuilding... No police force, no legal framework, no powerful traditional authority retained sufficient hold on the society to regulate behavior across Mozambique. Yet I never encountered a community that succumbed to chaos, inertia, or destructiveness... From the ashes of burned-out villages and broken families emerge new, shared communities. Communities that work.⁴⁵

What Nordstrom gives us a glimpse into are the irrepressible powers of constructive agency that ordinary people are capable of drawing on even under the most oppressive conditions possible. Yet this essential expression of human agency tends to be obscured by our dominant conceptual lenses and narratives. Only by conceptualizing it, and naming it, and learning to tell this story, will we begin to fully recognize its ubiquitous expression and begin to fully tap into its potential as a means of transformative social change.

In contemporary literature on constructive programs, one of the most commonly recognized examples is the Zapatista movement.⁴⁶ This movement is based in Mayan Indigenous communities in the Chiapas region of Mexico. It began with a brief armed uprising in 1994, followed by over three decades of largely nonviolent resistance coupled with remarkable expressions of constructive agency. Zapatistas live side by side with the wider population of the region, often within the same villages and towns. The movement encompasses between 300,000 and 400,000 people living in over 1,000 communities within an area of at least 24,000 sq km or 30% of Chiapas state. They have constructed a participatory system of direct democracy that operates with relative autonomy, on local and regional levels, in parallel with the Mexican state. In an effort to uncouple themselves from impoverishing effects of the global capitalist economy, they have constructed membership-run cooperatives and solidarity networks for producing and exchanging goods, within a reparative system of land redistribution for peasant farmers practicing ecological agriculture. They have constructed their own health and education systems, including a university. They have

⁴⁵ Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, 212–13.

⁴⁶ The overview that follows is distilled from Majken Jul Sørensen, Stellan Vinthagen, and Jørgen Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), chapter 7.

fostered a distinct collective identity and corresponding sense of dignity supported by storytelling, rich artistic expressions, and humor. Efforts are made to approach all of this in ways that embody Indigenous culture and cooperative values, even as the systems they develop continue to evolve through accumulated experience and draw selectively upon other traditions such as liberation theology, Marxism, and anarchism. This unique synthesis supports internal movements within the Zapatista community that seek to overcome inherited cultural patterns such as patriarchy. All of this has required perseverance and resilience in the face of ongoing harassment from the Mexican state and various economic actors. The Zapatistas have also emerged as a global node of movement learning, which has helped them develop important national and international alliances within a framework that promotes movement pluralism across efforts to construct many new social worlds.

Another movement that is commonly offered as an impressive example of constructive agency is the landless workers movement in Brazil (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST).⁴⁷ This nonviolent movement comprises materially impoverished rural and urban people who — with tentative legal support from the Brazilian constitution — occupy unproductive land on which they construct productive communities while seeking legal title through the courts, reinforced through various forms of contentious politics. Roughly six million activists have been mobilized in this way since the early 1980s. They have created approximately 1,600 government-recognized settlements that are now home to about 350,000 families. Much like the Zapatistas, MST settlements construct self-organized and egalitarian forms of governance; cooperative enterprises that span the farming, business, manufacturing, and banking sectors; health clinics and other social services, with associated training programs; literacy and technological training programs, primary and secondary schools, and a tuition-free Popular University of Social Movements (Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes, ENFF); and a regional news agency along with strategies for participating as another node in the global discourse on movement learning. All committees and decision-making bodies consist of an equal number of men and women. Alongside these institution-

47 The overview that follows is distilled from Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, chapter 6.

building processes is an emergent culture that has drawn values and ideas from diverse sources, including Indigenous animism, liberation theology, mysticism, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and Marxist structural analyses. And, like the Zapatistas, all of this has also been accomplished in the face of sometimes violent repression, often from paramilitary groups aligned with the interests of wealthy landlords wanting to retain long-term speculative land investments obtained through morally questionable means.

It should be noted, however, that the Zapatista movement and the MST movement are often held up as examples of movements that combine contentious and constructive strategies.⁴⁸ And it is toward this complicated relationship that we now turn.

Untangling the Relationship between Contentious and Constructive Agency

Majken Jul Sørensen, Stellan Vinthagen, and Jørgen Johansen examine a number of dual-strategy movements that combine contentious and constructive agency, and they contrast those with movements that focus solely on constructive agency. Their primary examples of the former are the Zapatista and MST movements. Their primary example of the latter is the Transitions movement.⁴⁹

The Transitions movement began in the UK in 2005 in response to concerns about fossil fuel dependency and climate change, and it has since become global. It consists of a network of community groups, linked through national hubs, that recognize the environmentally unsustainable nature of the modern capitalist economy with its focus on perpetual growth in consumption and that seek to effect a radical

48 Refer, for example, to discussion in Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*; Chabot and Vinthagen, "Decolonizing Civil Resistance"; Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen, "Rethinking Nonviolent Action and Contentious Politics: Political Cultures of Nonviolent Opposition in the Indian Independence Movement and Brazil's Landless Workers Movement," in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, ed. Patrick G. Coy, Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change (Leeds: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2007).

49 The overview that follows is distilled from Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, chapter 3.

transition toward new ways of living on this planet. The movement is premised on an understanding that modern political systems are incapable of effecting such a transition and citizens have to assume responsibility through self-organizing. This is done largely through local efforts to construct bottom-up solutions focused on things such as education and awareness raising, neighborhood relationship building, training workshops for a wide variety of do-it-yourself skills, sustainable energy and food production, sharing and repairing organizations, barter systems and local currencies, waste reduction and recycling programs, transportation alternatives, and other locally identified forms of constructive agency. The movement is thus focused on lifestyle changes, capacity building, fostering new patterns of social and economic existence, and resilience — through collective action now.

Though the movement embodies a foundational critique of the prevailing social, economic, and political order, it avoids contentious politics in the pursuit of radical social change. Rather, it seeks to unleash the transformative potential of collective human genius, vision, creativity, social innovation, and constructive agency — by fostering more caring and mature relationships with oneself, with others, and with nature. Thus, their primary focus is not on being against things, but on developing and promoting positive possibilities. Toward this end, they try to attract the widest possible range of protagonists, they avoid taking sides in political conflicts, and they refrain from staking out positions of “us” against “them.”

Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen (along with authors such as Annelon Kenis⁵⁰) have described the Transitions movement, and others like it, as apolitical or post-political. When constructive agency is not combined with contentious politics, they argue, it is not political. In this regard, they assert that the Transitions movement chooses to behave as if there are no conflicts of interest and thus refuses to accept that change is something one must fight for since powerful elites have interests in preserving the status quo and will not give it up without a fight. In this way, they equate political agency with contests of power among

50 Annelon Kenis, “Post-Politics Contested: Why Multiple Voices on Climate Change Do Not Equal Politicization,” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 5 (2019).

conflicting interest groups. Because the Transitions movement does not exert agency in this manner, they hypothesize that it risks becoming irrelevant.

This hypothesis is consistent with the agonistic theory of change articulated most explicitly by writers such as Chantal Mouffe.⁵¹ According to this theory — which has become “common sense” in many academic and activist circles — society is an arena of competition for scarce material and political resources, the latter of which includes political power. Real social change occurs when previously marginalized interest groups find the means of establishing new configurations of power that align with their interests. But the underlying dynamic of interest group competition is immutable, and thus the struggle for power between competing interest groups is an eternal characteristic of the human condition. The only things that change over time are the relative distribution of power and resources along with the specific rules of competition. According to this logic, any movement that ignores these fundamental parameters of social existence is apolitical, naïve, and irrelevant to real social change.

However, from a purely pragmatic point of view, we should be cautious about uncritically adopting prescriptions for social change that derive entirely from abstract assumptions. As we saw in Chapter 4, John Dewey pointed this out in response to Leon Trotsky’s insistence that violence was the only means of real social change. The same caution applies to arguments that insist every movement for social change must include contentious means to remain relevant. The agonistic theory of change this prescription derives from has not been empirically substantiated. Of course, historical examples that appear to support the theory can be found. But counterexamples can also be found. Consider, for instance the constructive program of early Christian communities, who did not seek confrontation with the state. Those community building efforts were widely characterized by inclusive and egalitarian participation in communal life, the protection and empowerment of women, economic cooperation and resource sharing, mutual aid and the alleviation of poverty, hospitality and generosity, and resilience in the face of persecution.⁵²

51 Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*; Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political: Thinking in Action* (London: New York, 2005).

52 Paula Fredriksen, *Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years* (Princeton, NJ:

This brings us back to the theory-laden nature of observation. Collective social actions and their efficacy have to be interpreted. But even before specific forms of social action can be interpreted, they have to be noticed. Both of these processes are always shaped, to some degree, by our language, assumptions, concepts, categories, and narratives.

In 2015, Stellan Vinthagen published an impressive sociological theory of nonviolent action that pays attention to its contentious and constructive expressions and interprets both in an integrative manner.⁵³ Vinthagen draws insight from Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault to articulate a discursive theory of nonviolent action. He argues that nonviolent movements engage in rational forms of symbolic or communicative action within the public sphere. Such actions have social meanings in that they publicly criticize existing social norms and assert the need for new ones. They also invite dialogue in the societal search for normative truths that support collective flourishing and social justice. Yet this occurs within an inherited power/knowledge nexus that reflects the interests of social groups who are invested in maintaining the status quo. From this perspective, the strategic purpose of nonviolent action is to disrupt that power/knowledge nexus and pressure those social groups to participate in the search for mutually acceptable truths upon which a new social reality can be constructed.

According to Vinthagen, nonviolent communicative action is, in this regard, consensus oriented — in the sense that it is oriented toward the search for new normative foundations upon which mutually acceptable social arrangements can be constructed. This search for a new social consensus requires humility on the part of social activists because social reality is infinitely complex, yet our perspectives on it are limited. Even those whom we initially disagree with may grasp aspects of the truth that we initially fail to grasp. Thus, if we are sincerely searching for truth across our differences, we need to create conditions that enable and support that search.

Violence across lines of difference confounds this collective search

Princeton University Press, 2024); Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

53 Stellan Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

because meaningful consensus can never be achieved through violent coercion. Vinthagen argues that nonviolent confrontations can, under the right conditions, shift inherited power dynamics in ways that bring otherwise reluctant participants into the shared search. Those conditions include nonviolent protagonists taking upon themselves the suffering that may be a requisite of social change, rather than imposing suffering on others. Those conditions also include nonviolent protagonists striving to embody more peaceful and just social norms within their movements and through their strategic actions.

This last condition is an aspect of what Vinthagen calls nonviolent construction. He associates nonviolent construction with three central concepts.⁵⁴ The first is a constructive program, or a plan for the construction of new social structures, institutions, and practices. The second is nonviolent training, or a systematic means of fostering the knowledge, skills, and self-discipline protagonists will need to effectively advance a nonviolent movement. The third is nonviolent ways of life, or the everyday expression of new ways of being that embody the new values, norms, and attitudes the movement is committed to. These aspects of nonviolent construction can all be understood as expressions of prefigurative politics — or utopian enactment — which bring coherence to the means and ends of nonviolent struggle. This coherence is part of what exerts a power of moral attraction that can help draw others into the search for a new social consensus.

Vinthagen acknowledges that there are inherent tensions in this theory of nonviolent action. For instance, even when nonviolent protagonists try to foster the search for a new social consensus through the power of moral attraction, such efforts must be reinforced by contentious nonviolent coercion. This, Vinthagen concludes, is one of many necessary creative tensions that constitute “the paradox of nonviolence.”⁵⁵

It should be noted, however, that the paradox Vinthagen alludes to is not inherent to all nonviolent means of transformative social change. The paradox arises when one adopts Vinthagen’s definitional premise that “nonviolence = without violence + against violence.”⁵⁶ This definitional

54 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 73–74.

55 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 327.

56 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 12.

premise informs Vinthagen's logic that nonviolent action requires "fighting violence in such a way that one refrains from using violence."⁵⁷ Fighting, in this context, is synonymous with contentious action — or what Vinthagen and many contemporary activists refer to as resistance.

Building on this definitional premise, Vinthagen formulates the secondary claim that "nonviolence = nonviolent construction + nonviolent resistance."⁵⁸ Thus "nonviolence combines building the new society with tearing down the old."⁵⁹ Elaborating on the unity of these "two connected dimensions of nonviolence," Vinthagen argues that "this unity is indissoluble."⁶⁰

This is a definitional assertion that has significant implications for what we look for and how we interpret it when we survey the field of nonviolent movements working for social transformation. It tells us that if we are interested in understanding or participating in such movements, we should primarily pay attention to those that combine nonviolent construction and nonviolent resistance. According to Vinthagen's definition, a movement that employs only one of these approaches should not be considered a true or effective nonviolent movement.

Given the decades of movement scholarship and activism that have largely ignored nonviolent construction, Vinthagen's definition is a welcome invitation to take the constructive dimension seriously. He is clearly asserting that contentious resistance, by itself, is not enough. Gandhi made the same assertion, and a growing number of nonviolent scholars and activists are beginning to arrive at a similar understanding.⁶¹

Vinthagen's definition also insists that the other dimension of

57 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 12.

58 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 63.

59 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 303.

60 Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*, 301.

61 Beyond those previously cited in this chapter, see, for example, Majken Jul Sørensen, "Constructive Resistance: Conceptualising and Mapping the Terrain," *Journal of Resistance Studies* 2 (2016); Bindu Mathew, "Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive Programme: Some Reflections," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (2012); Ekta Parishad, *A Guide to Nonviolent Activism* (New Delhi: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2020); Robert Burrows, *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995); Luke Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements," *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015); Sabet, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies: Special Issue on Constructive Resilience*; Schock, "The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance."

nonviolent action, the constructive dimension, is not enough by itself. In a subsequent elaboration of this thesis, Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen argue that in the absence of contentious resistance, a purely constructive program becomes depoliticized and thereby risks becoming irrelevant, being co-opted by capitalism or the state or turning into a new form of oppression.⁶² To avoid this, they argue, a movement has to engage in a nonviolent “us” against “them” confrontation, or fight, because some people have very strong interests in defending the status quo, and they will not give up their privileges without a fight.⁶³ By “pointing out the villains” in this manner, they argue, a movement is better able to mobilize less privileged groups.⁶⁴ They acknowledge, in turn, that contentious politics of this kind tends to result in repression. Constructive programs, they suggest, avoid repression either because they can occur “under the radar” or because they are “not seen as a threat to those in power.”⁶⁵ Thus, they conclude, “it is a reasonable assumption that the combination of resistance and construction under the same umbrella will be more powerful in the work for change than they would be working separately.”⁶⁶

On these points, Gandhi offered a different view. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Gandhi argues that if a population could be unified behind a constructive program, it would be enough to achieve transformative and emancipatory change. Not only would it be enough, he argues, such an approach would be preferable, because contentious nonviolence tends to compromise the prefigurative aims of a constructive program. This is because contentious nonviolence fosters the illusion of otherness within the interdependent social body. It normalizes contentious rather than cooperative relationships. And it unleashes oppositional and egoistic passions that easily — perhaps invariably — spiral out of control.

Gandhi’s assertion that a purely constructive program could

62 Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, see discussion of these themes on pages 5–8, 52, 195.

63 Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, see discussion of this theme on pages 69–76.

64 Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, 79.

65 Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, 195.

66 Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, 189.

effect socially transformative outcomes, by itself, may be naïve. If so, the preceding argument by Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen may represent a more realistic theory of nonviolent social change. But the empirical evidence is not yet clear on this point. Therefore, the argument that a constructive program must be combined with a contentious program to be effective is, at best, a working hypothesis. Moreover, it is not an easy hypothesis to test because the efficacy of many movements can only be assessed across broad historical timespans. The abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and many other socially transformative movements took many generations to achieve their ends. And many contemporary nonviolent movements — such as those seeking to eliminate racism, misogyny, war, and extremes of wealth and poverty, or those seeking to address climate change — will likely take many more generations to achieve their ends.

Furthermore, when Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen argue that purely constructive movements risk being co-opted by capitalism or the state, or turning into new forms of oppression, they overlook the fact that movements employing contentious forms of nonviolence can also succumb to these same outcomes. Indeed, it can be argued that the Gandhian independence movement and the U.S. civil rights movement, both of which employed contentious means, were eventually co-opted by the state. And contentious resistance tactics have, themselves, been repeatedly co-opted by capitalist interests as advertising tropes used to sell products to rebellious youth — from Levis to Pepsi and beyond. Indeed, within the Western liberal culture of contest, an argument can be made that movements engaged in contentious politics may be more likely to be co-opted than movements engaged in radical constructive programs seeking to supplant the culture of contest at a foundational level, because contentious politics are an integral part of the culture of contest (a theme we will return to in Chapter 7).⁶⁷

Likewise, when Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen argue that less privileged social groups struggling for survival are more effectively mobilized through contentious resistance, they offer no empirical evidence for this claim, they overlook the existential risks such groups can face when they engage in contentious politics against brutal

67 Michael Karlberg, "The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest," *Peace and Change* 28, no. 3 (2003).

regimes, and they overlook the fact that constructive movements have also been successful in mobilizing less privileged social groups. These points are clearly illustrated by the movement of Black cooperatives and mutual aid societies alluded to earlier — pursued first under conditions of enslavement and then under Jim Crow segregation — as a means of pooling limited resources and developing new social and economic capacities in struggles to overcome oppression.⁶⁸

Finally, when Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen argue that purely constructive movements avoid repression because they are not seen as a threat to those in power, they overlook the fact that some purely constructive movements have encountered severe repression precisely because they have been perceived as a threat to those in power. African American efforts to construct new patterns of community life and new institutional structures to support them in places such as Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Rosewood, Florida, encountered violent repression precisely because they were seen a threat to those in power.⁶⁹ Similarly, the purely constructive movement of the Bahá'ís in Iran has, for over 150 years, faced wave after wave of violent repression precisely because Bahá'í efforts to peacefully construct a new social order has been seen as a threat to those in power.⁷⁰ The main difference between contentious and constructive movements, in this regard, is that contentious movements actively seek to provoke those in power through performative public confrontations such as protests or acts of civil disobedience, while purely constructive movements do not. Nonetheless, both approaches have been met with violent repression.

With these considerations in mind, if we accept Gandhi's conception of nonviolence as a nascent science, then scientific humility dictates that we should remain open to at least two alternative hypotheses: (1) for any nonviolent movement to contribute effectively to transformative social

68 Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*; White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*; Hunt, *Dreaming the Present: Time, Aesthetics, and the Black Cooperative Movement*; Tyesha Maddox, *A Home Away from Home: Mutual Aid, Political Activism, and Caribbean American Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

69 Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*; González-Tennant, *The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence*.

70 Michael Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression," *Peace & Change* 35, no. 2 (2010).

change, it must adopt both contentious and constructive means, or (2) some nonviolent movements can contribute effectively to transformative social change by adopting exclusively constructive means.

When considering these hypotheses, we should also account for the fact that movements rarely act in isolation. Rather, they tend to act within a broader social ecology of movements, some of which pursue related ends through diverse means. Thus, a more complex formulation of the preceding hypotheses would be as follows: (1*) for transformative social change to be advanced within a complex social ecology of movements, all nonviolent movements must adopt both contentious and constructive means, or (2*) for transformative social change to be advanced within a complex social ecology of movements, some nonviolent movements can make distinctly valuable contributions by adopting exclusively constructive means.

According to this latter formulation, the second hypothesis appears quite plausible. It becomes even more plausible when we expand our conceptions of power and resistance beyond prevailing Western liberal conceptions and then think through the implications of this expanded conception. It is toward this effort that we now turn.

6. Rethinking Power and Resistance

As Chapter 5 demonstrates, the prevailing discourse on nonviolence tends to be premised on competitive or conflictual conceptions of power. Such conceptions are embodied in the prevailing tendency to associate nonviolent action with contentious politics. Thus, even activists and scholars who are beginning to take seriously the concept of a constructive program tend to view constructive nonviolence within a contentious frame. This can be seen, for instance, in Vinthagen's definitional premise, which we have already examined, that all nonviolent collective action, including constructive nonviolence = without violence + against violence.¹

Competitive and conflictual conceptions of power have deep historical roots in Western traditions of thought that have shaped the prevailing discourse on nonviolence. Such conceptions run through the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Steven Lukes, and many other influential Western thinkers.² As Anthony Giddens points out,

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- 1 Stellan Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 12.
 - 2 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (London: Penguin, 1961); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 [1651]); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1948); Max Weber, "Domination by Economic Power and by Authority," in *Power*, ed. Steven Lukes (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2 ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan 2005); Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996); Dennis H. Wrong, *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

competitive and conflictual conceptions of power underlie virtually all major traditions of Western social theory.³ And, as some feminist social theorists have pointed out, such conceptions arose within and reflect a male-dominated intellectual tradition.⁴

When power is understood in this narrow manner, its ultimate expression is domination. Hence power and domination are closely associated concepts within the Western tradition. The conception of power-as-domination has given rise, in turn, to the contemporary concept of resistance — because efforts to dominate are often met with resistance. Nonviolent action thus tends to be conceptualized in terms such as “nonviolent resistance” or “civil resistance” to oppressive expressions of power.⁵ Indeed, the concept of resistance has become so closely associated with nonviolent action that even constructive nonviolence is commonly referred to as “constructive resistance.”⁶ Such is the extent to which competitive and conflictual conceptions of power have come to frame nonviolent discourse.

The thinking of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. was

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- 3 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 256–57.
 - 4 Jean Baker Miller, “Colloquium: Women and Power,” *Work in Progress* (Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies) 82-01 (1982); Nancy Hartsock, “Political Change: Two Perspectives on Power,” *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1974); Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983); Robin Lakoff, *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (New York: Liveright, 2017); Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
 - 5 Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Erica Chenoweth, “The Future of Nonviolent Resistance,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020); Janet Conway, “Civil Resistance and the Diversity of Tactics in the Anti-Globalization Movement: Problems of Violence, Silence, and Solidarity in Activist Politics,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41, no. 2/3 (2003); Michael Nojeim, *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance* (London: Praeger, 2004); Kurt Schock, *Civil Resistance Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*.
 - 6 Kristen Atkinson and Mark Mattaini, “Constructive Noncooperation as Political Resistance,” *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 24 (2013); Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen, “Decolonizing Civil Resistance,” *Mobilization An International Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2015); Majken Jul Sørensen, “Constructive Resistance: Conceptualising and Mapping the Terrain,” *Journal of Resistance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016); Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*.

informed by a more expansive conception of power. They recognized the many competitive and conflictual expressions of power that could become manifest in all societies, and they saw that such expressions of power had become normative across Western civilization.⁷ They even tried to harness contentious expressions of power to the cause of social justice, through nonviolent means. Yet they were committed to learning how to engage other powers of the human spirit in the pursuit of social transformation. These included the powers of moral truth, of love, of unity, and of cooperation, among others. These latter powers operate through the force of attraction, not coercion. And they were at the center of Gandhi's constructive program, which he understood not as a form of resistance but as a way of transcending mere resistance.⁸

Nonetheless, when Gene Sharp wrote his influential *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, he inscribed the narrower Western conception of power across the entire theory and practice of nonviolence. Sharp conceptualized social and political power as the ability to control or dominate the behavior of others.⁹ He understood that such domination relies to some degree on the cooperation of those who are being dominated. He thus conceptualized nonviolence as a strategic form of noncooperation. Its purpose was resisting domination and attempting to transform oppressive relations of power.

Subsequent nonviolent activists and scholars have drawn heavily on Sharp's conceptions of power and resistance. They have also drawn on conceptions of power articulated by Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and related thinkers. The latter emphasize the ways culture and discourse can reinforce hegemonic relations of power.¹⁰ Culture and discourse are powerful factors in shaping our consciousness, our sense

7 Mohandas Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj," in *Gandhi: 'Hind Swaraj' and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1909]); Anthony Parel, *Pax Gandhiana: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010); Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Michael Nojeim, *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance* (London: Praeger, 2004).

8 Mohandas Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1941).

9 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Power and Stuggle* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973).

10 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

of self, our subjective experiences and dispositions, and our perceptions of social reality. In other words, culture and discourse shape what Pierre Bourdieu calls our *habitus* — our socialized subjectivity or our socially and linguistically structured state of being.¹¹ Thus, oppressive expressions of power are not merely exercised through overt forms of political coercion. They can also be exercised through culture and discourse — or through the inculcation of oppressive values and beliefs, the cultivation of oppressive desires and perceptions, and the construction of oppressive bodies of knowledge.

Culture and discourse can foster a sense of learned helplessness within, implicit consent for, and cooperation with, oppressive social arrangements. Therefore, it is not just overtly oppressive social structures and overt forms of political coercion that must be resisted. Oppressive cultural norms and discursive constructs must also be resisted. But the latter only becomes possible if such norms and constructs can be denaturalized through processes of critical consciousness raising. Hence, such consciousness raising is a requisite of strategic nonviolent actions because in the absence of consciousness raising, the underlying motivation to engage in such actions and the ability to envision their utility can be lacking. These are among the insights that derive from Gramsci, Foucault, and Bourdieu.

Foucault's conception of power as a relational property or a permeating force that acts within all social relations has additional implications for nonviolence. Power, thus understood, is socially and psychologically constitutive. It constitutes all forms of social organization and hierarchy, along with the subjectivities of all the social actors that participate in those social forms. Or, as Foucault puts it, "Power is co-extensive with the social body."¹²

Foucault argues that power, thus understood, is simultaneously productive and oppressive. Society cannot function without it, despite its perennially oppressive manifestations. Those oppressive manifestations

11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power," in *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Orthner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

12 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 142.

must therefore be continually resisted. Foucault thus focuses his analyses on oppressive manifestation of power, and he calls others to do the same. "We should direct our researches on the nature of power," he writes, "towards domination and material operators of power," and we should "base our analyses of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination."¹³

Foucault's influential views helped cement the conceptual association between power and resistance. As he puts it, "There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised."¹⁴ "Where there is power, there is resistance."¹⁵ Thus, according to Foucault, power and resistance are mutually constitutive and inextricably linked.

Sharp's model of power viewed relations of power as something that simply existed between social actors and could be consciously and overtly contested as such. Foucault's more complex model viewed relations of power as something that constitutes the subjectivities of the contestants themselves. Nonetheless, both views reinforce the conceptual association between power, domination, and resistance. And it is this association that gives rise to constructs such as "nonviolent resistance," "civil resistance," "contentious resistance," and even the arguably incongruous notion of "constructive resistance."

Expanding Our Conception of Power

The narrow conception of power sketched above has become axiomatic today among many social theorists and activists. Yet others argue for more expansive conceptions of power. For instance, some feminists and others argue that we need to distinguish the narrow concept of "power over" from the broader concept of "power to."¹⁶ As Thomas Wartenberg explains,

13 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 102.

14 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 142.

15 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 95.

16 Discussions of this distinction can be found in numerous sources including Hartsock, "Political Change"; Lewis Coser, "The Notion of Power: Theoretical Developments," in *Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings*, ed. Lewis Coser and Bernard Rosenberg (New York: Macmillan, 1976); Steven Lukes, ed., *Power* (New

The expressions *power-to* and *power-over* are a shorthand way of making a distinction between two fundamentally different ordinary-language locutions within which the term “power” occurs. Depending upon which locution one takes as the basis of one’s theory of power, one will arrive at a very different model of the role of power in the social world.¹⁷

In this regard, the discourse on nonviolence, since Gene Sharp, has been shaped primarily by the power-over conception and its corresponding notion of resistance. This conception normalizes conflictual and competitive expressions of power. Jean Baker Miller advocated a broader conception of power. When power is conceptualized as the capacity to produce change, she explains, this encompasses nurturing and empowering others, or enhancing rather than diminishing the power of others.¹⁸ Hannah Arendt argues that power should be understood as a collective capacity to act creatively and cooperatively, in an organized manner, with others.¹⁹ Nancy Hartsock also argues that power should be viewed not as domination but as capacity — capacities that are often expressed at the level of the community, rooted in experiences of connection and mutual relationship.²⁰

Echoing such sentiments, Anthony Giddens defines power as “transformative capacity” or “the capacity to achieve outcomes” — a definition which is consistent with the concept of power-to.²¹ Though Giddens recognized the importance of studying power-over relations in many contexts, he asserted that power is not intrinsically linked with conflict nor is it inherently oppressive.

Likewise, the peace studies scholar Kenneth Boulding articulated a model of power encompassing the capacity to build social structures and organizations, to inspire loyalty and to bind people together in a socially integrative manner. This model invites us to recognize how power can operate through ties of co-operation and reciprocity, friendship and collective identity, the growth of a sense of community,

York: New York University Press, 1986); Keith Dowding, *Power* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996).

17 Thomas E. Wartenberg, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 27.

18 Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 2nd edn. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976); Miller, “Women and Power.”

19 Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969).

20 Hartsock, *Feminist Historical Materialism*.

21 *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 15, 257.

the ability to create and pursue constructive images of the future together, and the belief that one's own well-being is linked to the well-being of others. Peaceful and just social systems, Boulding argues, can only be constructed on the normative basis of these integrative power-to-relations. Though Boulding acknowledges the existence of power-over relations, he argues that contemporary world conditions demand much wider recognition and promotion of integrative power in human affairs.

As all of these arguments suggest, the concept of power-over does not provide an adequate basis for analyzing — or transforming — social reality. On both counts, it obscures as much as it reveals. Of course, power-over relations exist, and they warrant sustained critical attention. However, what is needed is a more comprehensive schema that recognizes the full spectrum of power relations and provides an adequate basis for critical as well as normative social theory.

One way to approach this is to conceptualize power along two axes.²² The first axis is the extent to which relations of power are agonistic or mutualistic. The second axis is the extent to which distributions of power are equal or unequal. Figure 2 illustrates these axes.

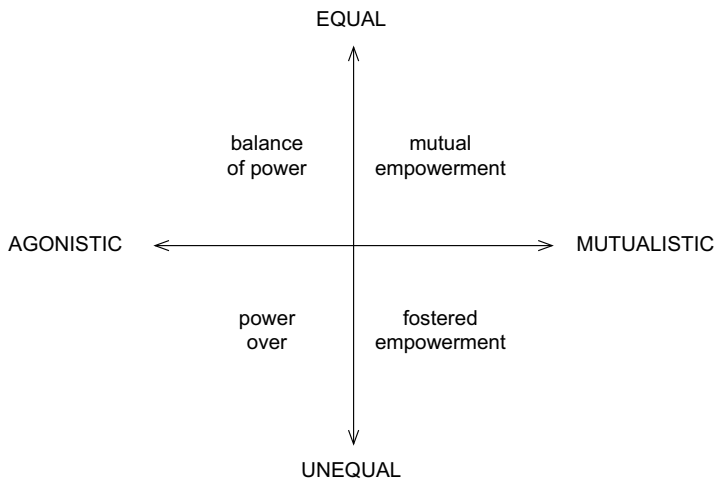


Fig. 2 Relational and distributive dimensions of power. Created by the authors (2026)

²² This schema is adapted from Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020).

Within this schema, power-over relations — as important as they are to recognize and address — constitute only one of four possible quadrants, situated in the lower-left of the diagram. Compromise, gridlock, and other balance of power relations are situated in the upper-left quadrant. Nurturing, educating, and other assisted or encouraged forms of empowerment are situated in the lower-right quadrant. Cooperation, reciprocation, coordination, and other mutual empowerment relations are situated in the upper-right quadrant.

This conceptual map brings into focus the relative nature of agonistic and mutualistic relations of power, along with the relative nature of power equality and inequality. It thereby reminds us that progressive movement is always possible along both axes. A nurturing relationship may begin with a high degree of inequality and steadily progress toward a state of relative equality, as is the goal in healthy parental and educational relationships. Conversely, a relationship may become more mutualistic over time, as it shifts from antagonism to cooperation, or from war to peace.

This schema also helps us see that power-over and power-to are not equivalent or comparable categories. Power-over is situated only in the lower-left quadrant, while power-to constitutes the entire field on which both axes exist. The schema thus enables us to critically analyze oppressive and competitive power relations while expanding our field of vision to recognize the nurturing and cooperative expressions of power that prefigure a more just social order, as illustrated in Figure 3.²³

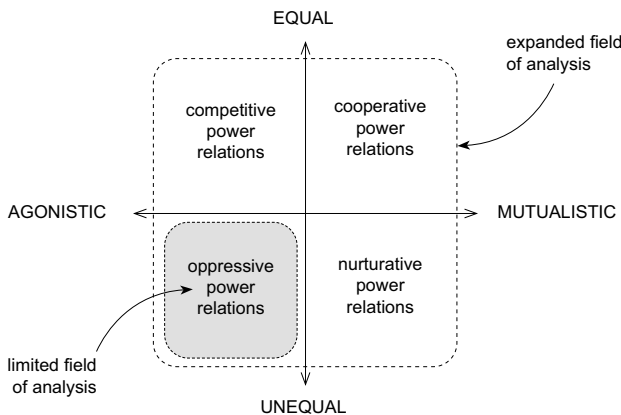


Fig. 3 Expanded analysis of power. Created by the authors (2026)

23 This schema is also adapted from Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*.

In light of Figures 2 and 3 above, we can recognize that the sources of power Gandhi and King centered in the prefigurative aspects of their work are all situated on the mutualistic side of this schema. These include the moral powers that are exerted by holding firmly to normative truths associated with collective flourishing, the unifying powers that are exerted by extending an all-inclusive love to the other, the maternal powers that are expressed by caring for and nurturing others on their developmental paths, and the creative powers that are exerted by collectively imagining and constructing more peaceful and just patterns of community life that are enriched by human diversity. These are all powers of attraction, not coercion. They are attractive, some argue, because when the human spirit is unfettered from egoistic impulses it is innately attracted to goodness, beauty, and truth.²⁴ They are also attractive, arguably, because the human spirit aspires toward creative expressions of agency, which all of these mutualistic expressions of power support.²⁵ In contrast, agonistic relationships, often motivated by narrow self-interests, tend to give rise to coercive and manipulative expressions of power that aim to limit and confound the agency of others.

The schema above enables us to view agonistic expressions of power and the impulses that motivate them as less fruitful or less mature expressions of power. It thus invites us to consider the means by which we can foster more fruitful and mature expressions of power. This is not merely a theoretical abstraction. It is also a pragmatic question — or a question of praxis — that can focus our efforts to generate, apply, and diffuse knowledge about processes of social transformation. In other words, this question can and should be a significant object of learning for movements.

The schema above also enables us to recognize that sources of agonistic power tend to be characterized by scarcity, while sources of mutualistic power tend to be characterized by abundance. For instance, military weaponry is a source of political power that can be wielded against others, yet it is characterized by scarcity. Money is a

24 Stephen Turley, *Awakening Wonder: A Classical Guide to Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2015); Howard Gardner, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Michael Penn, *Our Common Humanity: Reflections on the Reclamation of the Human Spirit* (Oxford: George Ronald 2021).

25 Michael Tomasello, *The Evolution of Agency* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022); Hugh McCann, *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

source of political power that can be wielded against others, yet it is also characterized by scarcity. Elite status within a social hierarchy is a source of political power that can be wielded against others, yet it is also characterized by scarcity. Such scarcity breeds the perennial contests for power we see so often in the contemporary world.

In contrast, the capacity to hold firmly to moral truths and apply them to the betterment of the world is an abundant human capacity, limited only by conscious awareness, will, and volition. Agape, or love for all members of the human family, is another abundant human capacity, again limited only by conscious awareness, will, and volition. Creative, cooperative, and constructive expressions of agency are also abundant human capacities, again limited only by conscious awareness, will, and volition.

All of these abundant capacities — or powers — find their expression in constructive service to the common good, or service to the betterment of humanity. And the betterment of humanity can be understood, in part, as the pursuit of social justice. Constructive forms of service on a path toward social justice can thus be understood as a form of direct action that invites universal participation.

This is a form of direct action that has no material barriers to mobilization. As Martin Luther King Jr. noted, “Everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve,” and it is through service to the common good, he emphasized, that we can “be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.”²⁶

Our challenge is to recognize these abundant human capacities as powers that can be harnessed to the cause of social transformation. As we do, we can also recognize that agonistic sources of power will take us only so far. This is, in part, because agonistic sources of power are characterized by scarcity. And it is, in part, because the aim of agonistic relationships is to undermine the efforts of the other. Ultimately, to construct and sustain a more peaceful and just social order, we will

26 James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 256–67.

need to tap into the more abundant — perhaps limitless — powers of the human spirit. An expanded conception of power thus offers an expanded conception of human agency.

The challenge facing movements committed to peace and social justice is learning how to systematically foster, release, and channel these latter powers — these forms of agency — in ever greater measure. This is another pragmatic question that can and should become a significant object of movement learning.

Finally, the schema above invites us to adopt a more expansive understanding of resistance. Resistance is a sensible and predictable reaction to power-as-domination. But a more expansive conception of power requires a more expansive conception of resistance. For instance, holding firmly to the power of moral truth can engender resistance among those seeking to deny truth. In this context, who is resisting whom? Likewise, promulgating the power of all-inclusive love can engender resistance from those committed to hate. In this context, who is resisting whom? More broadly, the power of transformative constructive agency can engender resistance by those seeking to preserve the status quo. In this context, who is resisting whom?

Expanding Our Conception of Resistance

For reasons discussed above, the broad concept of nonviolent social change is often conflated with the narrow concept of resistance. In the process, the Gandhian concept of a constructive program becomes the incongruent notion of “constructive resistance.”²⁷ This latter notion obscures Mohandas Gandhi’s more complex and bidirectional understanding of resistance.

For Gandhi, the constructive program was not an expression of resistance *to* power-as-domination. On the contrary, he saw the constructive program as an autonomous expression of agency. He also recognized that, due to its socially transformative purpose, the constructive program would sometimes engender resistance by those

27 Atkinson and Mattaini, “Constructive Noncooperation as Political Resistance”; Chabot and Vinthagen, “Decolonizing Civil Resistance”; Sørensen, “Constructive Resistance: Conceptualising and Mapping the Terrain”; Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*.

wielding power-as-domination. He thus saw the constructive program as proactive, not reactive. And he saw its participants as protagonists, not antagonists.

Based on this logic, Gandhi urged these protagonists to “hold themselves in readiness, if the constructive effort is sought to be defeated” by its antagonists.²⁸ And of these protagonists he wrote, “When they become conscious of their non-violent strength, no power on earth can resist them.”²⁹ But finding this strength, he argues, requires them to understand the constructive program as the central agent of India’s movement for independence, “which gives it an irresistible prestige and power.”³⁰ Thus Gandhi envisioned the relationship between power and resistance in a bidirectional manner. On one hand, he viewed civil disobedience as a means of resisting oppressive manifestations of power. On the other hand, he viewed the constructive program as an independent means of marshalling creative and generative powers that, in turn, might be resisted by those seeking to preserve oppressive social arrangements.

This bidirectional understanding of resistance is of fundamental importance to a theory of nonviolent social change. It invites us to ask not merely what protagonists of social change are struggling against, but also what they are struggling for. These dual ends are related but they are not identical. For instance, history is replete with people who stood against particular forms of social injustice yet tolerated other forms of social injustice because their vision was limited by a narrow perception of identities and interests. Thus, struggling against a particular form of injustice is not identical with struggling for universal conditions of social justice.

A bidirectional understanding of resistance also offers a more empowering perspective on history. A unidirectional understanding of resistance implies that history is characterized by never-ending manifestations of domination and oppression, whose myriad victims can do little more than adopt ever-permutating forms of resistance. In contrast,

28 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, iv.

29 Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, 15–16.

30 Gandhi uses the “office” analogy to illustrate how a humble individual can become very powerful when they assume a position within an office that confers power on them. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, 23.

a bidirectional understanding of resistance brings into focus the myriad movements of people exerting creative, constructive, proactive forms of agency aimed at transforming the very conditions of human existence in a lasting manner. The latter offers a much more meaningful and motivating sense of historical agency within a framework of purpose and hope.

Elaborating on this theme, Michelle Alexander writes that “resistance is a reactive state of mind. While it can be necessary for survival and to prevent catastrophic harm, it can also tempt us to set our sights too low and to restrict our field of vision.”³¹ Viewed from the broad sweep of history, she explains, the universal struggle for social justice constitutes the river of human progress, which is fed by many culturally distinct tributaries. In relation to this river, it is those who are seeking to preserve oppressive social arrangements — or to prevent human progress — who are the resistance. What is at stake in such a reframing is the question of who we see as the protagonists or antagonists in the story of humanity, and how we conceptualize power. These are not trivial questions. The way we answer them can impart, or deny, a sense of historical agency to all those who aspire to live in a more peaceful and just social order.

This logic also has implications for the concept of everyday resistance introduced by James Scott and subsequently taken up by a wide range of scholars and activists.³² This concept helps us see that, in response to oppressive expressions of power, most resistance does not take the form of revolutionary movements or other large-scale organized collective actions. Rather, resistance to oppression more commonly takes the form of small, subtle, subversive actions, and simple forms of noncooperation, that multitudes of people engage in within the routines of daily living. Such everyday resistance can also be understood as an expression of infrapolitics — or forms of political action that are not readily visible when viewed through the lens of organized politics.³³ A rich body of

31 Michelle Alexander, “We Are Not the Resistance,” *The New York Times – Opinion Column* (21 September 2018).

32 James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen, eds., *Conceptualizing ‘Everyday Resistance’: A Transdisciplinary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2020); Mikael Baaz, Mona Lilja, and Stellan Vinthagen, *Researching Resistance and Social Change: A Critical Approach to Theory and Practice* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2018).

33 James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Alberto Moreiras, *Infrapolitics: A Handbook* (New

literature has emerged documenting such practices, and these practices undoubtedly constitute a significant form of resistance that arguably traces back as long as the history of oppression itself.

As the literature on infrapolitics illustrates (and as Foucault emphasized), oppressive expressions of power also operate at this micro-level. Furthermore, the expansive conception of power elaborated earlier in this chapter helps us recognize that everyday practices of constructive agency motivated by the pursuit of social justice can also constitute micro-expressions of emancipatory power. This is a ubiquitous form of infrapolitics. It can be seen, for instance, in countless individual efforts to foster mutually dignifying and mutually empowering relationships in neighborhoods or workplaces, across lines that have historically divided people, in the pursuit of a more compassionate and just world.

The bidirectional conception of resistance elaborated above also helps us recognize the ways micro or macro expressions of constructive agency can be met with everyday practices of resistance by those who are invested in the status quo. We see this, for instance, in micro-expressions of racism, sexism, and xenophobia that constitute conscious or unconscious reactions to movements of inclusion and emancipation that have been advancing — myriad difficulties and setbacks notwithstanding — in recent decades.

In addition, if we are attentive to the psychology of social change, we can recognize that subtle expressions of power and resistance can also play out within our own psyches, or at the level of our basic subjectivities. Indeed, if we accept the insights into power articulated by thinkers such as Foucault and Bourdieu, then we must recognize the significance of this. If cultural and discursive operations of power shape human subjectivities, then internalized forms of oppression must be resisted, in part through internal struggles.

This is an essential locus of struggle on the path toward social justice. But even in this domain of struggle, negative resistance is not sufficient. The positive cultivation or construction of emancipatory forms of subjectivity is necessary to supplant internalized forms of oppression. Thus, constructive agency is required even at this level. And this raises

York: Fordham University Press, 2021); Žiga Vodovnik, *A Living Spirit of Revolt: The Infrapolitics of Anarchism* (Binghamton, NY: PM Press, 2013); Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

another pragmatic question for movement learning: How can we learn to more effectively foster these empowering forms of resistance and constructive agency within communities and across populations?

Furthermore, if we recognize that some of the deepest underlying sources of oppression can be found in instincts that are innate to human nature itself — such as the twin susceptibilities of egoism and othering discussed earlier in this book — then the concepts of power and resistance take on an even more elemental meaning. Egoism and othering are, in a very real sense, innate psychic forces that must be internally resisted if we hope to construct a more peaceful and just social order. And here again, resisting our basest instincts is necessary but not sufficient. We also have to cultivate within ourselves other positive capacities, or generative powers, that are capable of supplanting, to some degree, impulses such as egoism and othering. And yet, as Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* reminds us, our internal conditions are always structured, to some degree, by external conditions. Therefore, constructing a new *habitus* for ourselves requires both individual and communal effort. And this raises yet another pragmatic question for movement learning: How can these elemental forms of resistance and constructive agency be more systematically, effectively, and universally fostered?

In response to this line of reasoning, critics might argue that the expanded conceptions of power and resistance discussed above constitute such a departure from the way these concepts are normally used today that they expand these concepts beyond recognition. We argue, however, that if one is genuinely interested in learning about the means of pursuing social justice, prevailing conceptions of power and resistance are too reductive. They obscure as much as they reveal. Our aim should not be preserving inherited conceptions that are no longer fit for purpose. Rather, our aim should be contributing to an evolving conceptual framework that, when tested against reality, proves capable of advancing movements of social transformation. And there is urgency to this latter work.

7. Supplanting the Culture of Contest

One of the things obscured by narrow conceptions of power and resistance is “the paradox of protest in a culture of contest.”¹ Western modernity has given rise to a culture of contest that structures virtually every public institution as a contest of power. For reasons elaborated below, these structural arrangements are primary sources of oppression in the modern world. Not surprisingly, the oppressive tendencies of these arrangements give rise to countless movements for social justice, which tend to adopt contentious politics as a primary means of pursuing change. However, contentious politics are yet another expression of the prevailing culture of contest. And they reinforce this culture’s justifying premises about human nature and social reality. How, then, can movements overcome this paradox in order to bring about meaningful and lasting forms of social justice?

Beyond Contests of Power

To grasp the full implications of this paradox, we need a deeper analysis of the oppressive and dysfunctional relationships around which the prevailing social order has been organized because social justice is ultimately a matter of just relationships. In large part, relationships in the prevailing social order have been built with the “tools” of competition, in the sense Audrey Lorde used this metaphor. As Lorde noted, in the struggle to overcome systems of oppression, “the master’s

1 Michael Karlberg, “The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest,” *Peace and Change* 28, no. 3 (2003)

tools will never dismantle the master's house."² The concept of radical constructive agency extends this insight by suggesting we also need new tools to build a fundamentally new kind of house in which everyone can live in dignity under conditions of contributive justice.

Virtually every aspect of the master's house has been fashioned by the normative principle of competition. When we critically examine this principle, we find that it embodies the following implicit logic: Competition = self-interested striving for excellence = winners and losers + social progress. Stated another way, the modern notion of competition couples egoism with striving for excellence in order to sort society into winning in-groups and losing out-groups, based on the argument that all of this leads to social progress through some kind of social Darwinist alchemy. Though rarely stated in such an explicit manner, this logic has become implicit "common sense" in much of the modern world.

But this logic is deeply flawed. Egoism is not the only motivation that can drive us to strive for excellence and social progress. Altruism can also motivate us toward these ends, whereas competition can undermine them.³ Even in the field of evolutionary biology, which this social Darwinist logic tries to draw on, scientists now recognize that competition is not the only driver of evolutionary fitness. Mutualism is an equally important, if not more important, dynamic that determines the survival of the fittest.⁴ Mutualism confers evolutionary fitness within and among species. The first nucleated cells emerged through mutualism. The habitability of earth's atmosphere is sustained by the mutualistic exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide between all plants and all animals. The fitness of countless social species — from ants and bees to canines and primates — is the result of mutualism and cooperation. Even the health of the human body — or what some

2 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 27.

3 Research supporting these arguments was summarized several decades ago in Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1992); Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

4 Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998); Lynn Margulis and Rene Fester, eds., *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

now call the human biome — is ensured by the presence of trillions of mutualistic microorganisms.

Furthermore, while competition also played a role in the long evolutionary struggle for survival, humanity has transcended the mere struggle to survive. Exponential advances in human productivity have given us the means to ensure the well-being of every person. What we lack is the collective will to do so, because we have not yet learned how to systematically and universally cultivate the latent capacities for altruism and inclusion that are clearly a defining characteristic of our species. When excellence is motivated by altruism and inclusion, social progress need not lead to winners and losers. In other words, social progress is not a zero-sum game.⁵

What does this have to do with the master's house? That house was built around competitive relationships. More specifically, it was built through contests of power. By definition, contests of power result in winners and losers. And their outcomes are shaped by inherited hierarchies of power. Political contestation offers the illusion that power can be fundamentally redistributed with each round of contestation — as seen in the succession of parties who are able to capture the state through partisan elections, or even in the succession of regimes who are able to capture the state through political revolutions. But the winners in all such contests, despite their ideological differences, still tend to come from positions of relative privilege within inherited hierarchies of power. And even when less powerful segments of society are able to seize power, this tends to merely establish a new hierarchy of power that becomes the baseline for subsequent political contestation. Thus, as long as the exercise of power remains a zero-sum game, there is no reason to assume the underlying logic of political contestation will change.

This is the defining logic of the prevailing culture of contest by which modern societies tend to structure almost every social institution according to the principle of competition.⁶ We structure governance as a contest of power. We structure the economy as a contest of capital accumulation. We structure the legal system as a contest of legal

5 Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).

6 Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004).

advocacy. We structure education as a contest for grades, recognition, and opportunity. We even structure most forms of recreation and leisure as physical or mental contests. This culture of contest, which was built to segregate winners from losers, is the master's house.

In its contemporary incarnation, the master's house offers the illusion of fairness. Consider, for instance, the capitalist economy. In theory, those who are the hardest working, most innovative, and most efficient competitors "win" in free-market contests. In practice, however, competitors do not all enter the contest at the same time with the same resources because resources (such as wealth, social connections, and educational opportunities) are not equally distributed in actually existing human populations. In this regard, the contemporary economy is like a game of Monopoly™ in which some players started the game early, played until they bought up most of the property, and then invited other players to join them. Even though the latecomers have been invited to play by the same rules as those who started the game earlier, they are perpetually handicapped by a constant need to pay rent and few opportunities to accumulate their own properties.

Consider also the case of partisan politics, which is founded on the same organizing principles as a capitalist free market. In the economic market, capitalists compete for control over the means of economic production. In the political market, politicians compete for control over the reins of government. In the latter instance, this occurs through processes of political entrepreneurship in which politicians compete with one another in their efforts to build and maintain political capital.

Such contests may offer the illusion of being fair and open, with the outcome merely reflecting the aggregate preferences of the majority of voters. Thus, as Vaughan Lyon explains, "Supporters of party government argue that if one looks at the larger picture and sees the 'political market' in which several parties, the media, interest groups, and individuals all interact, democratic needs are served in a kind of mysterious way... [as though] another 'invisible hand' is at work."⁷ But the invisible hand of the political market acts much like the invisible hand of the economic market. It privileges those with the most power at the

7 Vaughan Lyon, "Green Politics: Parties, Elections, and Environmental Policy," in *Canadian Environmental Policy: Ecosystems, Politics, and Process*, ed. Robert Boardman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 129.

outset of the contest. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand. Political contests are expensive. Winning requires a substantial amount of personal wealth or financial patronage. Therefore, by structuring our political processes as contests, we have created systems that cater primarily to the interests of those who can afford either to directly finance the contestants or to indirectly influence their success.

Finally, consider the case of legal advocacy contests. The legal adversary system is founded on the same competitive principles as the capitalist economy and the partisan political system. The underlying assumption of the legal adversary system is that the truth is most likely to emerge in an open contest because no one has more incentive to work for the emergence of truth than the righteous contestant. In practice, however, the truth is a secondary and often elusive outcome. In actual legal contests, though one contestant may be working hard to present the truth, the other contestant can be working equally hard to obscure the truth. Indeed, the prevailing legal principle of “zealous advocacy” raises the latter practice to the level of a professional responsibility for advocates even when they know their clients are guilty. Furthermore, legal contests, like political campaigns, are very expensive. The power of money, rather than the power of truth, is what buys the best legal advocacy. The result is a system of jurisprudence that primarily caters to the interests of those who can afford to finance the best legal advocacy. As Strick explains, this contest model

serves not only the lawyers and judges who directly administer it, but society’s power-holders down the ranks. For adversariness is a mode that singularly advantages power. Most of its beneficiaries therefore worship adversary procedure “like motherhood itself”, and either remain blind to its defects, hold that despite those defects it serves a higher good, or work at screening its fraud from public gaze. Yet fraud it is. For by its nature the adversary approach to dispute settlement disserves the rest of us — almost totally.⁸

In all of these arenas — market, government, and courts — contest models tend to privilege those at the top of existing social hierarchies. We might still accept these models based on the rationalization that no model is perfect, that all models involve trade-offs, and that these

8 Anne Strick, *Injustice For All* (New York: Barricade Books, 1996), 16–17.

particular models have great strengths that outweigh their weaknesses. However, if we step back to view these three models as a single integrated system, which is what they have become, then these rationalizations fail.

Our economic, political, and legal systems are not separate, isolated systems. They are interconnected and interdependent. They can be understood and analyzed as an integrated tripartite system of contests. This tripartite system is deeply problematic because modeling all three domains as contests inherently subordinates political and legal processes — including market regulation — to market forces. Again, the logic is simple, and it is widely understood today: Because political and legal contests are expensive, the outcomes of political and legal contests are determined by the outcomes of economic contests (which are themselves influenced by pre-existing social hierarchies). Hence the tripartite system has an inherent internal hierarchy. Political and legal contests are subordinated to economic contests due to the intrinsically expensive nature of contests. Thus, within this tripartite system, it is virtually impossible to regulate the economy in a just or sustainable manner because the political and legal institutions that should be regulating it are instead subordinate to it.⁹

Moreover, to be effective, political and legal regulations ultimately need to be complemented by the moral self-regulation of individual economic actors. Only by operating in concert can these internal and external forms of regulation provide the necessary constraints and incentives needed to maximize the benefits of a market while curbing its excesses. Yet here again, just as a tripartite system of contests fails to provide for external regulations on market activity, it also fails to cultivate moral self-regulation among market actors. When virtually all public activity is structured as a series of contests that reward the competitive pursuit of material self-interests, the social environment is not conducive to moral development and self-regulation. Ubiquitous and indiscriminate competition tends, in the terms laid out in Chapter 1, to cultivate egoism and othering rather than altruism and inclusion.

One of the primary legacies of this tripartite system, with its failure of both external and internal regulation of market activities, are perennial disparities of wealth and poverty. This condition constitutes one of

9 Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence*.

the most significant obstacles to peace and justice in the world today because it fosters a state of perpetual conflict and instability within and between social groups.

This tripartite system is also environmentally unjust. Consider again, the functioning of the free market within the tripartite system. In unregulated markets, production and consumption decisions are based largely on the internal costs of manufacturing processes. These include costs of labor, materials, manufacturing equipment, energy, and so forth. These internal costs determine the retail prices that consumers pay for products, which, in turn, influence how much they consume. These costs, however, do not always reflect the true ecological price of a product. Many industries generate external costs, or externalities, that are never factored into the price of a product because they are not actual production costs.

For instance, industries that pollute the environment create substantial public health and environmental remediation costs that are seldom factored into the actual costs of production. Rather, these costs tend to be borne by the most vulnerable segments of society, by future generations, and even by other species. Because an unregulated market does not account for these external costs, the prices of products with high external costs are, in effect, kept artificially low through taxpayer subsidies as well as the impoverishment of "ecological capital." These subsidized prices inflate consumption of the most ecologically expensive (or damaging) products.

For these reasons, market economies are environmentally unjust unless carefully regulated by governments that account for such external costs and factor them back into the prices of goods through "green taxes" and other means. As discussed above, however, markets are virtually impossible to regulate effectively within the tripartite system because the system subordinates political and legal decision making to market forces.

Contest models also lead to intergenerational injustices. Environmental stewardship requires long-term planning and commitment. Competitive political systems, however, are inherently constrained by short-term horizons because in order to gain and maintain political capital, political entrepreneurs must cater to the immediate interests of voting constituents. This focus on constituents-

in-the-present tends to undermine commitment to the interests of future generations. Prominent among the interests of future generations, of course, is the sustainable stewardship of the environment by present generations. Even in those exceptional cases when sustainable policies are adopted out of moral principle by one candidate or party, continuity is often compromised by successive candidates or parties who dismantle or fail to enforce the programs of their predecessors in order to distance themselves from policies they were previously compelled to oppose on the campaign trail or as the voice of opposition. The consequence is systemic injustice on an intergenerational scale.

Likewise, just as competitive political systems are responsive to constituents-in-the-present at the exclusion of future generations, they are also responsive to the interests of constituents-within-electoral-boundaries at the exclusion of people outside of those boundaries. This is especially the case at the level of the nation state due to the absence of an effective international framework of law and governance. Again, this has both ecological and social justice implications. The transboundary nature of many modern environmental issues (e.g., global warming, water and air pollution, or the management of migratory species), signals the need for unprecedented levels of global cooperation and coordination. Competitive notions of national sovereignty, however, render the existing international (dis)order virtually incapable of responding to these ecological imperatives. Within the existing international system, sustainability and transnational justice are sacrificed to the pursuit of national self-interests as political entrepreneurs must cater to the short-term desires of their own voting citizens. The consequence is an anarchic and competitive system of nation states vying with one another in their rush to convert long-term ecological capital into short-term material gains.

Another reason partisan systems tend to be socially and environmentally unjust has to do with the nature of partisan debate. Partisan debate is about winning political capital. Choosing the best course of action under a given set of social and ecological conditions tends to be a secondary and generally elusive outcome. Moreover, partisan debate tends to reduce complex and multifaceted issues to simple polarized positions. Yet most social and environmental issues are complex and multifaceted. They cannot be resolved through simple binary arguments. Furthermore, in an age of mass-mediated sound-

bite politics and social media algorithms, such arguments are reduced to emotional sloganeering designed merely for short-term political advantage and increasingly divorced from any concern for truth. Such partisan rhetoric is woefully inadequate as a basis for sound social and environmental decision making.

Finally, competitive political systems also tend to be socially and environmentally unjust because those segments of the population who tend to suffer the most from degraded social and environmental conditions — namely the poor and various marginalized social groups — are least able to influence political decision making due to their relative political and economic disenfranchisement. As a result, social conditions and environmental practices that are seldom tolerated in more affluent neighborhoods or communities are commonplace in politically and economically marginalized ones. The tripartite system can thus be seen as an integrated system of social and ecological injustice.

Contest models of social organization — at least in their modern tripartite combination — arose from the thinking of affluent, educated, and relatively powerful social classes during the European “enlightenment.” These models coincided with the self-interests of those social classes because contests, as discussed above, tend to favor those with power. Those same classes also occupied positions of cultural leadership — as merchants, statesmen, writers, philosophers, and so forth — through which they shaped popular assumptions about human nature and social organization that undergird the culture of contest.

The culture of contest has thus led to countless social injustices which have, in turn, led to countless struggles for social justice. Paradoxically, the “common sense” that informs the culture of contest leads many to believe that the best way to pursue social justice is through even more political contestation — or through contentious politics.

The paradox lies in the fact that within the culture of contest, contentious politics is one of “the master’s tools.” Contentious politics is the tool that enables successful movements for social justice to force piecemeal adjustments to the rules of competition and, in some cases, it enables movements to reconfigure who is winning and losing. It is also a tool by which the entire culture of contest can let off steam, so to speak, without threatening its underlying logic. Contentious politics thus prevents a movement from moving *beyond* the culture of contest. On the

contrary, it reinforces the underlying logic of the culture of contest.

Recognizing this dynamic is not the same as arguing against the use of contentious politics as a means in the struggle for social justice. Contentious politics has achieved some gains in the past. Piecemeal adjustments to the rules can matter. But primary reliance on contentious politics has arguably reached a point of diminishing returns. The increasing atomization of society by social media and other forces makes it exceedingly difficult to envision, organize, and sustain the most effective forms of contentious politics, such as collective campaigns of mass civil disobedience, general strikes, and occupations — even as powerful forces that shape our media systems have learned how to neutralize such strategies through framing mechanisms that ignore them, trivialize them, misrepresent them, or mobilize public sentiment against them. And, while social media makes it possible to assemble large public protests on a moment's notice, ever-expanding numbers of people showing up at protests tends to result in ever-diminishing gains due in part to those same framing mechanisms, along with a range of other factors such as the increasingly sophisticated containment methods of states and corporations, the increasing indifference of many political institutions, increasing protest fatigue within the public, the substitution of simple mass demonstration tactics for more complex tactics such as civil disobedience, the absence of sustained movement organizing of the kind that can build momentum over time, and the inability to articulate clear, positive alternatives to the status quo.¹⁰

Returning to the issue of media representation, the modern public sphere tends to be dominated by the voices of the most powerful segments of society. In totalitarian societies, activists pursuing social change have no access to the public sphere. In liberal democracies with advertising-financed media systems, activists can gain limited forms of access by staging extreme forms of spectacle. This is because

10 Micah White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution* (Toronto: Penguin, 2016); Alasdair Roberts, *The End of Protest: How Free-Market Capitalism Learned to Control Dissent* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve Lebaron, *Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Asef Bayat, *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

the business model of advertising-financed media is to manufacture audiences as cheaply as possible and sell their attention to advertisers. One of the most profitable ways to do this is through cheap spectacle. Many activists have learned how to exploit this model by staging nonviolent spectacles that gain media coverage. In the process, however, their messages invariably become simplified and distorted, and thus their concerns are easily trivialized and marginalized — and they can end up alienating more of the public than they attract to their cause.¹¹

Despite these kinds of dynamics, movement activists still “win” occasional “battles,” but the root causes of their concerns tend to remain unaddressed and the larger “wars” they wage are arguably not going well. In addition, contentious politics embodies assumptions that have harmful internal consequences for movements, such as factionalization and infighting. For instance, virtually all of the social projects of the “left” throughout the twentieth century have suffered from recurrent internal factionalization. The opening decades of the century were marked by political infighting among vanguard Communist revolutionaries. The middle decades of the century were marked by rancorous theoretical disputes among leftist intellectuals. And the closing decades of the century were marked by the fracturing of the New Left under the centrifugal pressures of identity politics. Underlying this pattern of factionalization and infighting is the tendency to interpret differences — of class, ethnicity or “race,” gender, perspective, or strategy — as inherent sources of antagonism and conflict rather than as resources that can enrich collective human endeavors.

The political “left” and “right” both define themselves in terms of a common adversary — the other — defined by ideological differences. Not surprisingly, advocates of both the left and right frequently invoke the need for internal unity in order to prevail over their adversaries on the other side of the alleged political spectrum. However, because the terms “left” and “right” are both artificial and reified categories that do not reflect the complexity of actual social relations, values, or beliefs, there is no way to achieve lasting unity within either camp because there are no actual boundaries between the camps. In reality, social relations, values, and beliefs are infinitely complex and variable. Yet once an

11 Stephen Dale, *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1996).

adversarial posture is adopted by assuming that differences are sources of conflict, initial distinctions between “the left” and “the right” are inevitably followed by subsequent distinctions within the left and the right. Once this centrifugal process is set in motion it is difficult, if not impossible, to restrain.

Furthermore, contentious nonviolent strategies are increasingly being adopted by regressive movements that seek to re-impose oppressive social arrangements that were previously lost through the contentious nonviolent strategies of progressive movements.¹² Rather than appeal to the moral conscience of observers, such strategies appeal to the grievances that can result when historical privileges are lost in the absence of a recognition that particular losses can be outweighed by universal gains. Such strategies include civil disobedience — expanded to encompass disregard for any laws a given political group considers obstacles to the ends they seek. This problem was noted over half a century ago by Hannah Arendt, who wrote that

civil disobedience arises when a significant number of citizens have become convinced either that the normal channels of change no longer function, and grievances will not be heard or acted upon, or that, on the contrary, the government is about to change and has embarked upon and persists in modes of action whose legality and constitutionality are open to grave doubt [...] In other words, civil disobedience can be tuned to necessary and desirable change or to necessary and desirable preservation or restoration of the *status quo*.¹³

Of course, “necessary and desirable” is open to the interpretation of vying political groups, depending on the ends they seek. Thus, even as the discourse on nonviolence has shifted many progressive movements away from the pursuit of their ends “by any means necessary,” some regressive movements have begun to wield the instruments of nonviolence, including civil disobedience, for any ends desired.

Arendt warned that if the organized political practice of civil

12 William Allchorn Elisa Orofino, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism Groups, Perspectives and New Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Sabine Volk, *How the German Far Right Appropriates Ideals of Non-Violent Resistance* (OpenDemocracy, 25 March 2021), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/how-german-far-right-appropriates-ideals-non-violent-resistance>

13 Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969), 74.

disobedience continues to expand in these ways, it will threaten to undermine the foundational social contract that the rule of law itself rests on. We are thus witnessing repeated cycles of nonviolent political contestation characterized by progress and regress. Yet we see little change in the underlying political substrate that nourishes such contestation, even as we risk the catastrophic consequences that can accompany the collapse of the rule of law — consequences that tend to be suffered most acutely by the most vulnerable members of society.

Finally, when dual strategies of contentious resistance and constructive agency are pursued, the short-term psychic gratification offered by contentious actions may divert energy away from the more difficult, long-term, less-immediately-gratifying labor of building a new social order. In this regard, contentious resistance can arguably become an emotionally seductive distraction or diversion from the most important work on the path toward social justice.

For all of these reasons, the politics of contestation have arguably reached a point of diminishing returns. Even if such strategies were necessary and viable in the past, when human populations were less socially and ecologically interdependent, those conditions no longer exist. Our reproductive and technological success as a species has led to conditions of unprecedented interdependence, and no group on the planet is isolated any longer. Under these new conditions, new strategies — new tools — are not only possible but imperative. Humanity has become a single interdependent social body. In order to meet the complex social and environmental challenges now facing us, we have to learn to engage in collective action in historically unprecedented ways. An interdependent social body cannot coordinate its actions as long as its “left” and its “right”, or its “north” and its “south”, or its “east” and its “west” are locked in dysfunctional relationships.

Pressures for such coordinated collective action are mounting daily. Threats of global warming, global health pandemics, weapons of mass destruction, transnational crime syndicates, and global economic collapse are all pressing us to find new modes of collective and coordinated action. Under these conditions, the culture of contest, including its tool of contentious politics, will not get us where we need

to go. This is the paradox of protest in a culture of contest.¹⁴

Mohandas Gandhi was among those who understood this paradox. His radical constructive program sought to construct an entirely new social order beyond the culture of contest. But he was unable to mobilize enough people within his constructive program or to sustain it long enough to achieve the ends he sought. And, as he foresaw, his contentious strategies played a role in stirring up divisive identity-based passions that he could not contain — passions that led to one of the major bloodbaths and associated population displacements of the twentieth century. Though those contentious strategies helped throw off the oppressive yoke of the British empire, they ushered in a new culture of contest with new inflections.

The way to move beyond the culture of contest and the myriad social injustices that are intrinsic to it is through radical constructive agency. To grasp this dynamic, consider the metaphor of a game. All games are defined by their rules. In this regard, cultural institutions can be conceptualized as games that operate according to specific sets of rules. This game analogy is not meant to trivialize cultural institutions. Such institutions can have powerful impacts on the lives of people. The analogy is employed to highlight the central role that implicit and explicit rules play in structuring such institutions.

Within the culture of contest, virtually every institution operates according to competitive rules. When less powerful players agree to join in such a game, they are consenting to play by rules that, in the long run, tend to promote their own defeat. Contentious politics are among those rules. They are intrinsic to the culture of contest and they reinforce its logic.

The alternative is to withdraw one's time and energy from the old game in order to construct a radically new one. The only thing perpetuating the old game is the fact that the majority of people consent to its rules. If an alternative game begins to yield recognizable results — such as increased social justice for all — then that game will begin to attract increasing numbers of people to it (i.e., the majority of people whose interests and values are not well served by the old game). If enough people stop playing by the old rules and start playing by new

14 Karlberg, "The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest."

ones, the old game will come to an end not through confrontation but through attrition.

The alternative strategy, then, is one of construction, attraction, and attrition. This strategy does not rely on the politics of contestation. It relies only on radical constructive agency. In doing so, it fully reconciles the means of social change with the ends of moving beyond the culture of contest. Stated another way, it does not seek to disrupt, dismantle, or resist the culture of contest. It seeks to entirely supplant the culture of contest by building its replacement.

Mark Mattaini points out how difficult this logic is for Western activists, who tend to focus so little on constructive programs. "One of the reasons," for this, he suggests, "may be that thinking in terms of constructive responses to conflict ('There is a problem — what shall we build') is deeply countercultural in contemporary Western societies, which characteristically respond to control with countercontrol, and to coercive pressure with countercoercion."¹⁵

From within the logic of the culture of contest, a purely constructive program appears, at first glance, to be a naïve retreat from the hard work of resistance that is needed to effect social change. But the preceding game analogy offers another perspective. Since the politics of contestation are part of the hegemony of the culture of contest, radical social change requires that we recognize this and invest our time and energy in the construction of a radically new game based on entirely new rules.

This approach to social change is not "apolitical." It is arguably the most radical expression of political agency available to us. Nor is such a strategy a way of avoiding the hard work of social change. Long-term efforts to construct more just systems that are capable of supplanting oppressive ones is a much harder form of work than short-term efforts to confront existing systems. Indeed, this is a reason some people assume the construction of a radically new social order is unrealistic. It is presumed to be too hard. In comparison, confronting existing systems is much easier to imagine.

¹⁵ Mark Mattaini, *Strategic Nonviolent Power: The Science of Satyagraha* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013), 143, parenthetical statement is in the original text.

Beyond Us versus Them

In Chapter 1, we examined research into the elemental human instincts toward egoism and othering — how they begin to manifest themselves from infancy, and how they interact in complex societies to produce oppressive social hierarchies. These twin susceptibilities are the soil in which the culture of contest is rooted, because it is a culture of us versus them. And these susceptibilities are difficult to root out not only because they become structurally entrenched, but also because they can be psychologically gratifying impulses, in the basest sense.

We also examined research into the human capacities for altruism and inclusion, the way these capacities also begin to express themselves from infancy, and the way processes of education and socialization influence the degree to which these ennobling capacities are able to supplant our instincts toward egoism and othering.

As noted in that same chapter, the construction of in-group and out-group distinctions tends to give rise to cooperation, trust, and empathy within in-groups; but it tends to breed competition, suspicion, and antipathy in relation to out-groups. This latter tendency has been a perennial force that has given rise to myriad oppressive social hierarchies, from ancient caste systems to modern racism. Though the particular lines of demarcation constituting such hierarchies are established culturally, the instincts underlying those demarcations are innate and universal. Thus, even if a population of children could somehow be raised without any cultural cues regarding who constitutes “the other,” such demarcations and the oppressive hierarchies they give rise to would emerge anew — unless some proactive cultural force was working to supplant our instincts toward egoism and othering by strengthening our capacities for altruism and inclusion. Such demarcations would emerge anew because in the absence of more powerful socializing influences, humans tend to experience egoism and othering in emotionally and psychologically gratifying ways.

In other words, we are not born into this world pure and noble, only to be corrupted by impure and ignoble forces in our social environments. Rather, the seeds of our oppressive tendencies lie dormant in the soil of the human psyche, always ready to grow. Our challenge is to cultivate, in their place, the seeds of altruism and

inclusion, which are also latent human potentialities.

Diverse modern societies will never establish lasting conditions of social justice unless and until we learn how to do this in more systematic and universal ways. This is among the most elemental of challenges humanity must face — consciously and purposefully — in the pursuit of social justice.

As we noted in Chapter 2, empirical research has generated compelling clues regarding how we can meet this challenge. Altruism and inclusion can be cultivated by fostering an abiding consciousness of the oneness of humanity. Such a consciousness is able to harmonize diversity within a superordinate perception of our shared humanity. Moreover, the latter perception can be experienced as a phenomenologically robust, rationally meaningful, and morally compelling guide for behavior. Indeed, such an overarching sense of identity appears to be the only non-exclusive and non-contingent basis for the secure sense of belonging that all humans need in order to flourish. Such a secure sense of belonging enables diverse particular identities to assume their most prosocial expressions.

All of this has profound implications for the pursuit of social justice. If the means of social change prefigure the ends, then the pursuit of lasting social justice will require means that strive to supplant egoism and othering with altruism and inclusion by fostering an abiding consciousness of the oneness of humanity. This imperative is yet another reason contentious politics may be reaching a point of diminishing returns. Though contentious means have been employed with varying degrees of success by different movements in the past, such means invariably presume and perpetuate in-group/out-group distinctions, often organized around demarcations such as “oppressors” and “oppressed” or variations on this theme. Granted, oppressive social hierarchies are real. The question is whether the underlying human instincts that perennially give rise to oppressive hierarchies can be overcome in the long run by activating those same underlying instincts in the short run. This is a question of coherence between ends and means at the most elemental level. In other words, it is a question of prefiguration that takes human psychology into account. In this regard, Carlie Trott invites us to take more seriously the psychology of prefigurative politics. As Trott notes,

Psychological perspectives within social movement scholarship have disproportionately concentrated on a *politics of demand*, that is, on modes of instrumental collective action characterized by identity- or issue-based groups making demands (e.g., for rights or recognition) of power-holders. Less attention has been given to movements pursuing alternative routes to social change, including those engaged in a process-oriented *politics of the act* — or prefigurative politics... Given that the prefigurative process takes place within and between individuals — with aims of changing the macrostructure by altering micro-relations — psychological theories and concepts are imperative to their understanding.¹⁶

As the discussion in Chapter 5 noted, Gandhi was intuitively attentive to the psychology of prefigurative politics. He was especially concerned with the tendency of contentious nonviolence to stir up divisive and uncontrollable passions based on the illusion of otherness. This is, in part, why he argues for the centrality of the constructive program. Gandhi's underlying concern about contentious politics derived from his understanding of human interconnection and interdependence. For Gandhi, wholeness is Truth. When we understand that society is an organically interdependent whole, we can recognize that otherness is untruth. In the struggle to transform society, our true opponent is the self — or our basest instincts. Those who oppress others are ignorant of Truth and are acting on those instincts. To eliminate oppression, we need to help those who are ignorant of Truth recognize and reflect on it, so they can manifest their latent humanity. This requires respect, compassion, love, understanding, and moral suasion. Such were Gandhi's views on othering.¹⁷

Such views were echoed by Martin Luther King Jr., who argues that we need to distinguish between systems of oppression and those who have been drawn into their logic. King's goal was not to blame, humiliate, or defeat the oppressor but to win their understanding and create a beloved community across all lines that have historically divided.¹⁸ This cannot be done by imitating the attitudes and behaviors that fuel division

16 Carlie Trott, "Constructing Alternatives: Envisioning a Critical Psychology of Prefigurative Politics," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2016), 266–67.

17 For insightful elaboration of this topic, see William Starosta and Lili Shi, "Alternate Perspectives on Gandhian Communication Ethics," *China Media Research* 3, no. 4 (2007).

18 Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).

and oppression. It requires recognizing the humanity of others, forming relationships, extending dignity, seeking mutual understanding, and acting out of love and compassion. Similar arguments have been made by a wide range of scholars and activists, from bell hooks,¹⁹ to Thích Nhất Hạnh,²⁰ to Paulo Freire.²¹

Such views should not be confused with the naïve notion that it is possible to win over the hearts and minds of every self-interested actor engaged in gross acts of oppression. Rather, such views assume the hearts and minds of some can be changed — a view that is clearly supported by empirical evidence.²² Over time, such efforts can gradually shift the proportion of people in any given society who are prone to such acts. Or stated another way, under the right conditions, some people will voluntarily give up privilege in order to promote the common good. Our challenge is to expand the prevalence of such conditions.

It is also important to recognize that many of the oppressive forces playing out in societies are not calculated expressions of tyranny by the few. Rather, they are the result of countless, small, sometimes unconscious, self-interested thoughts and actions by the many. Such thoughts and actions can accumulate gradually over generations and can become consolidated into social structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression. We have all been raised within such structures and we all, to varying degrees, unconsciously perpetuate their internal logic.

For instance, it is almost impossible to spend any money in the modern economy without perpetuating injustice, because injustices can be embedded in supply chains that remain invisible to us. Likewise, it is almost impossible to vote in partisan elections without perpetuating injustice, because injustices can be embedded in the strategic calculations

19 bell hooks, "Love as the Practice of Freedom," in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Michael Monahan, "Emancipatory Affect: bell hooks on Love and Liberation," *The CLR James Journal* 17, no. 1 (2011).

20 Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993).

21 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972 [1968]).

22 See, for example, Steven Windisch et al., "Disengagement from Ideologically-Based and Violent Organizations: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal for Deradicalization* 9 (2016); Eli Saslow, *Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist* (Norwell, MA: Anchor, 2018); Christian Picciolini, *Breaking Hate: Confronting the New Culture of Extremism* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2020); Daryl Davis, *The Klan Whisperer* (Silver Spring, MD: Lyrad Publishing 2024).

parties make to win contests for power. Therefore, the challenge facing all who are truly concerned with social justice is to recognize that, ultimately, there is no “us” and “them.” Yes, gross tyranny exists. At the same time, we all share some responsibility, through our personal thoughts and actions, for the conditions of the world.

The impulse to identify groups we can criticize, blame, shame, and other leads to endless cycles of contention that perpetuate the oppressive culture of contest. Indeed, this impulse is a major cause of the factionalizing processes that have divided many movements against themselves or set adjacent movements against one another, and thereby undermined their efficacy. For instance, in the 1960s and early 1970s, a constellation of movements in the U.S. shared common aspirations to create a more peaceful and just world. These included the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the peace movement, the environmental movement, and related movements that were all rebelling against inherited social norms, practices, and corruptions they considered oppressive. For a brief period of time, it seemed as though all these movements were aligning within a greater movement of movements that could collectively achieve transformative social change. But conflict and competition within and between these movements fractured their fragile unity and dissipated their efforts, as documented by one of their major protagonists.²³

Thus, the impulses toward egoism and othering run deep in human nature. On one hand, they give rise to myriad oppressive social hierarchies. On the other hand, they stymie many movements seeking to overcome those hierarchies. We can reduce these tendencies only by learning how to foster altruism and inclusion within an ever-expanding portion of the population. Toward this end, we should be looking for insight into effective means wherever we can find it.

For example, at the Swiss Center for Affective Sciences, Florian Cova and Julien Deonna have been researching the affective experience of being moved.²⁴ They argue that being moved is a distinct type of emotion that arises when we witness the expression of a positive core value that stands out in some context. They define such values as those that a

23 Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995).

24 Florian Cova and Julien Deonna, “Being Moved,” *Philosophical Studies* 169 (2014).

moral community treats as possessing “transcendental significance,” in contrast to more mundane values associated with shared tastes in food or other inter-subjective preferences.²⁵ Examples of transcendental values include striking manifestations of love, friendship, moral courage, or altruistic sacrifice for the good of others. When one is moved by salient expressions of such values, they argue, the experience can subtly strengthen one’s moral framework, help expand one’s horizon of concern, effect a shift in one’s priorities and action tendencies. Furthermore, they argue that shared experiences of being moved can foster a sense of group belonging and “feelings of oneness.”²⁶

These forms of inspiration are probably more effective ways of changing hearts and minds than criticizing, arguing, blaming, and shaming. Indeed, a growing body of literature is beginning to explore the foundational role of emotions associated with moral awe, moral exemplarity, and moral elevation in processes of psycho-social change.²⁷ Thus, while egoism and othering can be psychologically gratifying in the basest sense, altruism, inclusion, and a host of other ennobling human qualities can move and inspire us in profound ways.

In an era of ever-increasing polarization, some movements are leaning into this by learning how to find common ground across putative lines of difference as a means of fostering inclusive relationships, mutual understanding, empathy, care, and trust. Such conditions are effective ways of changing hearts and minds because they help us move beyond our baser instincts for egoism and othering which, in turn, enables us to begin the difficult work of assessing aspects of our own thought and behavior we may need to let go of. Such conditions also enable us to identify aspects of our thought and behavior that are worthy of strengthening, along with new patterns we may want to develop. In sum, this approach suggests the efficacy of building outward from points of unity in ways that inspire change, rather than sharpening points of difference in the

25 Cova and Deonna, “Being Moved,” 454.

26 Cova and Deonna, “Being Moved,” 459.

27 See, for example, Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion,” *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003); Kristján Kristjánsson, “Emotions Targeting Moral Exemplarity: Making Sense of the Logical Geography of Admiration, Emulation and Elevation,” *Theory and Research in Education* 15, no. 1 (2017); Christoph Klebl, Isabel Dziobek, and Rhett Diessner, “The Role of Elevation in Moral Judgment,” *Journal of Moral Education* 49, no. 2 (2020).

generally futile effort to force change by criticizing or attacking the values and beliefs of others. With regard to the latter, insights from the field of social neuroscience suggest that our brains react to attacks on our values and beliefs — which are mechanisms of othering — in much the same way we react when we are physically attacked.²⁸

In sum, if the means of social change prefigure the ends, then the pursuit of lasting social justice will ultimately require us to develop means that enable us to move beyond the oppressive culture of contest. In part, this entails learning how to calm our instincts for egoism and othering while fostering our capacities for altruism and inclusion. In other words, it will require us to start erasing socially constructed binaries of “us” versus “them” in order to recognize our organic interdependence.

Moreover, since egoism and othering are perennial instincts, we will not rid ourselves of these susceptibilities through some final act of purification. Rather, we will need to develop the cultural capacities to supplant these instincts in every generation — in sustained, effective, systematic, and universal ways. Clearly, learning how to do this will be a long-term process of monumental proportions.

To grasp the implications of this, consider the accomplishment of widespread literacy in many parts of the modern world. Only a few centuries ago the idea of universal literacy would have been difficult for many people to imagine. Today, universal literacy is easy to imagine, and most countries have made great strides toward this end. But universal literacy will never be a one-and-done project, because literacy has to be culturally reproduced with every generation. Therefore, sustained universal literacy requires the development of sustained means for fostering literacy in an ongoing manner.

Similarly, fostering more universal expressions of altruism and inclusion will require the development of sustained means for cultivating these latent human capacities. In other words, it will require the

28 See, for instance, Cedric Lemogne Jean-Yves Rotge, Sophie Hinfray, Pascal Huguet, Ouriel Grynspan, Eric Tartour, Nathalie George, Philippe Fossati, “A Meta-Analysis of the Anterior Cingulate Contribution to Social Pain,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 10, no. 1 (2015); Matthew Lieberman and Naomi Eisenberger, “A Pain by any other Name (Rejection, Exclusion, Ostracism) Still Hurts the Same: The Role of Dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex in Social and Physical Pain,” in *Social Neuroscience: People Thinking About Thinking People*, ed. John Cacioppo, Penny Visser, and Cynthia Pickett (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

development of a kind of oneness literacy that will need to be fostered anew in each generation. This represents not only a monumental test of human capacity. It also represents a fundamental challenge to the most basic premises underlying Western modernity. It will require a transition to fundamentally new forms of human civilization.

Our Transitional Era

In recent years, many political commentators have suggested that the Western world has entered into “a crisis of liberalism” due to the inherent contradictions of the Western liberal framework.²⁹ Others argue that the entire post-World War II global order is collapsing due to the inherent contradictions of the prevailing global architecture.³⁰ Some have asserted or implied that the entire constellation of values, assumptions, and social arrangements that have dominated the modern era are proving inadequate to the social and ecological imperatives facing humanity in an age of global interdependence, and, as a consequence, we may be entering into a period of civilizational collapse or transition.³¹ Still others assert that the liberal democratic order and the humanistic values that

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- 29 Pierre Manent, “The Crisis of Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 1 (2014); Jacques Rupnik, “The Crisis of Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018); Vukan Marković, “Awaiting the Demise of the Liberal Order: Historicising the Crisis of Liberalism,” *Philosophy and Society* 34, no. 3 (2023); Fred Siegel and Joel Kotkin, *The Crisis of Liberalism: Prelude to Trump* (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2020); Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022); Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
- 30 John Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019); Leon Fink, *Undoing the Liberal World Order: Progressive Ideals and Political Realities Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2nd edn. (New York: Polity, 2018).
- 31 Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking Press, 2011); Paul Raskin, Tariq Banuri, Gilberto Gallopín, Pablo Gutman, Al Hammond, Robert Kates, Rob Swart, *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead. A report of the Global Scenario Group* (Boston, MA: Stockholm Environment Institute & Tellus Institute, 2002); Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Dmitry Orlov, *The Five Stages of Collapse* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2013); Daniel Duhart, “Descentrando lo material: mapeando el contenido espiritual en los discursos latinoamericanos de transición civilizatoria. ¿La demanda de una relación más sofisticada?,” *Revista Colombiana de Sociología* 47, no. 1 (2024).

underlie it are fundamentally flawed because they depart from a pre-modern social logic that allegedly strengthened humanity by promoting the survival of the fittest; and they aspire to actively dismantle every element of modernity that runs counter to that logic.³²

At the time this book was being written, the last of these views was rapidly gaining ground, and an associated political project of dismantling was surging forward. Thus, in a strange irony, a “conservative” project of dismantling the modern social order appears, at the moment we are writing, to be at least temporarily overtaking the “progressive” project of dismantling the same order.

While we flatly reject the social Darwinist logic alluded to above, and the political project associated with it, we accept the premise that humanity has entered a period of civilizational crisis characterized by profound dislocation. At the same time, we are concerned that the dual projects of dismantling alluded to above, proceeding either from the right or the left, are likely to leave a vacuum that will merely be filled by new forms of oppression. This problem was alluded to in Chapter 1 and illustrated by the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the political vacuum left by the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Similar patterns can be seen in the French Revolution that overthrew the Ancien Régime only to usher in the Jacobin Reign of Terror followed by Napoleon Bonaparte’s authoritarian rule; in the Communist revolutions that ushered in Stalinism and Maoism; and in other historical contexts.

With such possibilities in mind, we acknowledge that the immediate prospects for humanity are uncertain at best. We may well be entering into a very fraught period in which the scale of human suffering will increase. Nonetheless, we also see in this tumultuous period the long-term potential for a fundamental transition in human affairs toward a more peaceful and just social order. As Martin Luther King Jr. foreshadowed, we are entering “one of the most momentous periods of human history... an age in which a new social order is being born.” While acknowledging the concerns of those who argue we are

32 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment* (Wichita, KS: Imperium Press, 2023); Hugo Thornton Rowley, *Curtis Yarvin & The Neoreactionary Canon, Made Simple* (Self published: Hugo Rowley, 2025); Andrew Jones, “From NeoReactionary Theory to the Alt-Right,” in *Critical Theory and the Humanities in the Age of the Alt-Right*, ed. Christine Battista and Melissa R. Sande (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

retrogressing instead of progressing, he suggested that “the present tensions represent the necessary pains that accompany the birth of anything new.” Elaborating this theme, he wrote,

It is both historically and biologically true that there can be no birth and growth without birth and growing pains. Whenever there is the emergence of the new we confront the recalcitrance of the old. So the tensions which we witness in the world today are indicative of the fact that a new world order is being born and an old order is passing away.³³

We concur with King’s analysis. We also believe we may now be entering the most difficult stage of transition. This stage is likely to be painful and protracted. And it is in light of this analysis, that we return to the second thesis laid out in the introduction to this book. At this transitional moment in human history, contentious means of pursuing social change are reaching a point of diminishing returns, and we now need to center radical constructive agency as a primary means.

Radical constructive agency implies the construction not only of new social forms, but of new social forms that address the root causes of the challenges we face, including the root causes of injustice and oppression. Modernity, in this sense, can be viewed as an axial age in human affairs. It is an age in which we, as a species, have been developing scientific, technological, and economic powers that have transformed the material conditions of our existence. But we have not yet developed the social and spiritual maturity these new powers and new conditions require of us, and our current recklessness is leading toward catastrophic consequences. The imperative of this transitional age is to construct entirely new patterns of coexistence on this planet.

In other words, though the arc of the moral universe is long, we are living through a potential inflection point when collective human agency can bend that arc toward justice. But this will require us to adopt radical constructive agency as a primary means of social change. Toward this end, we should seek to build on insights drawn from a wide range of relevant experiences.

33 From “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” in James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 135.

Learning Our Way Forward

Constructive agency is not limited by an inherently “apolitical” nature. It can be profoundly political. What can limit constructive agency is a deficit of radical imagination.³⁴ In other words, many expressions of constructive agency are not bold enough. Hence the need to center radical constructive agency in our repertoire of means. Radical imagination entails the ability to think beyond the limitations of existing social realities by envisioning new social realities — more just social realities — that appear unrealistic based on prevailing assumptions.

Radical imagination becomes a transformative force when it moves beyond individual creativity and becomes a collective expression — the constructive imaginary — that inspires and sustains collective action within a movement for social transformation.³⁵ This is how the radical imagination becomes harnessed to projects of worldmaking.³⁶ To build a new social reality, people have to first be able to imagine the possibility. Radical constructive agency is the collective act of trying to translate such a vision into a tangible reality.

If radical imagination is the motive force behind world-making projects, radical constructive agency is the essential means of such projects. But such projects also require time. Efforts to change a social policy, or even to change a regime, can sometimes be accomplished on a scale of months or years. Worldmaking takes generations. Given the scale of human suffering in the present, many activists argue that more urgent and contentious forms of action are needed. But this argument

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- 34 Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014); Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2022); Adom Getachew, ed., *Imagining Global Futures* (Boston, MA: Boston Review, 2022); Ruha Benjamin, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024); Alex Khasnabish, “Ecologies of the Radical Imagination,” *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 12 (2020).
- 35 Michael Karlberg, “The Constructive Imaginary,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 30, no. 3 (2020).
- 36 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978); William Pencak, ed., *Worldmaking* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); Jessica Horn, *African Feminist Praxis: Cartographies of Liberatory Worldmaking* (New York: Sage, 2025); Aida Mariam Davis, *Kindred Creation: Parables and Paradigms for Freedom—Black Worldmaking to Reclaim our Heritage and Humanity* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2024).

can combine a short-sighted measure of human suffering with impulsive expressions of urgency.

With regard to the first of these considerations, reasoned concerns about human suffering need to account for both present and future measures of suffering. Failure to focus on long-term projects of radical constructive agency may actually increase net human suffering over time because such failures forestall the more radical transformations needed to end perennial cycles of oppression. With such a calculus in mind, it becomes possible to recognize that focusing on short-term campaigns of contentious resistance at the expense long-term projects of radical constructive agency might increase the net scale of human suffering by many orders of magnitude.

And the impulsive sense of urgency alluded to above confuses the need for urgency with desire to see instant results. But urgency can also be wedded to the need for actions-in-the-present that hasten our collective advancement down a path of more transformative long-term results. Responding to human suffering is undoubtedly urgent. It calls for action now. The question is what kind of action now will lead to the greatest reduction in net human suffering over time.

As previously stated, this is not an argument against contentious politics. Rather, it is an argument for recognizing the complex ecology of movements for transformative change. Such movements can employ a range of means in their pursuit of social justice. In this transitional period of human existence, we would do well to begin centering radical constructive agency as a primary means.

But this is no easy thing. Radical constructive agency is a complex capacity for movements to develop and sustain over time. Building a new social order is much harder than dismantling an existing one, and it takes different tools. You can dismantle a house with wrecking bars and sledgehammers, which any unskilled laborer can wield. Building a house requires a wide range of specialized tools along with people who have developed the skills to wield them with forethought and precision. And to build a house of contributive justice, we will need appropriate tools.

Foremost among those tools are contributive means that prefigure the contributive ends we aspire toward. In other words, we will need to adopt inclusive and empowering means that strengthen the capacity of individuals and groups from all backgrounds to contribute to the

design and construction of this new house. This includes means that encourage some people to make space for the contributions of those who have previously been marginalized or excluded. It also includes means that awaken in some a sense of historical agency — or a sense that they have meaningful contributions to make as protagonists in the unfolding story of humanity.

But we should not presume, at this time, that we fully understand what such means will look like in practice, and what they will require of us. There is still much to learn. The implications of this can be appreciated if we revisit Gandhi's vision of nonviolent social change as an emerging science. Within this vision, diverse movements for social justice can be understood as diverse programs of community action research, each contributing to an evolving global body of practical knowledge. Some of that knowledge is about methodology — or means.

Moreover, different nonviolent movements operate within different conceptual frameworks and will be generating insight into different means. This is a good thing. This is how the systematic generation of knowledge advances even in the natural sciences.³⁷ Different conceptual frameworks bring different questions into focus. They enable us to test different hypotheses derived from different underlying assumptions about reality, which can require the development of different methods. Within the "science" of nonviolent social change, this promotes diverse forms of collective action, or diverse means. We can thus appreciate the complementary nature of different programs of action research. Many of these will yield compelling and often complementary insights. Some insights will prove more fruitful than others. But the only way to assess the merits of each is to see how fruitful each proves to be, over time, in contributing to the construction of a more just social reality.³⁸

Indeed, a rich global literature on movement learning has now developed, based on these knowledge-generating practices of movements.³⁹ The conception of movements as knowledge generators is

37 Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Alan Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?* (New York: Open University Press, 2011); Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

38 Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020)

39 See, for instance, Marjorie Mayo, *Community-Based Learning and Social Movements:*

based on a pragmatic theory of change that calls us toward a posture of learning characterized by a spirit of humility. Most importantly, it invites us to move beyond the “strategy wars” that have caused factionalization between and within many past movements for social justice. It also calls us to develop new capacities because the systematic generation, diffusion, and application of knowledge about the reconstruction of social reality, across diverse movements, is an enormously complex undertaking.

In relation to constructive programs, this pragmatic theory of change suggests that we should encourage the multiplication of diverse programs of action research, informed by diverse conceptual frameworks, to see which prove fruitful over time. Some movements may integrate constructive agency with contentious resistance. Some may focus solely on radical forms of constructive agency. Indeed, the preceding argument suggests it is urgent to center the latter in our pursuit of social justice. And we should resist the temptation to judge any given program until we can begin to assess its fruitfulness, its ability to scale up over time, and its resilience in the face of adversity.

Toward this end, this book constitutes an invitation to contribute to an expanding program of action research on radical constructive agency as a means of pursuing social justice — or as a means of advancing toward the horizon of contributive justice.

As we advance such a program of action research, a word about language is warranted. The phrase “radical constructive agency” is only one way to describe the broad approach to transformative change we have advocated in this book. The phrase encompasses a set of complex and interrelated concepts that can and should be described in different ways in different contexts. Indeed, phrases like this are often reduced to simplistic slogans, which are then invoked in simplistic arguments such as the strategy wars alluded to above. Such arguments reduce,

Popular Education in a Populist Age (Bristol: Polity Press, 2020); Joe Currow and Tenner Vea, eds., *Learning to Engage: Movements and Sociocultural Theories of Learning* (2020); Aziz Choudery and Dip Kapoor, eds., *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Laurence Cox, “Movements Making Knowledge: A New Wave of Inspiration for Sociology?,” *Sociology* 48, no. 5 (2014); Maria Isabel Casas-Cortes, Michal Osterweil, and Dana Powell, “Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008).

rather than expand, our capacity for collective learning across forms of diversity that should enrich our learning.

With this in mind, we invite those who want to contribute to this program of action research to develop a rich and complex palette of language that enables us to advance on a complex path of learning across diverse contexts. Different communities seeking to become protagonists of their own development and diverse movements seeking to advance toward the horizon of contributive justice will find language that builds on their own traditions and speaks to their own sensibilities. And all of this language will evolve over time. If the concept of radical constructive agency contributes to this in some way, it will have achieved its purpose.

8. The Bahá'í Experience

As we seek to expand the range of experience contributing to an action research program on radical constructive agency, it is worth revisiting an argument by Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen that we briefly touched on in Chapter 5. Chabot and Vinthagen argue that a Western bias in the discourse on nonviolent social change has led to a disproportionate focus on contentious politics and instrumental rationality.¹ These biases obscure the importance of dignified subjectivities among many people pursuing social change. Such subjectivities are often associated with principled commitments, relational worldviews, and moral or spiritual sensibilities that give meaning to people's lives and that can lead to expressions of political agency that tend to fall outside the Western secular gaze. Another bias Chabot and Vinthagen note is the tendency to project Western liberal visions regarding the ends of social change, thereby ignoring other meaningful, plausible, and compelling visions of a more just social order and the forms of political agency needed to pursue those visions. The discourse on nonviolence, they conclude, needs to be enriched by other moral visions and approaches because many different stories of nonviolent social change are possible — indeed many already exist — but we need to recognize them as such in order to learn from them.

Why Look at a Religious Movement?

With this invitation in mind, it is worth noting that, historically, many religious movements have played significant roles in radical processes of social change. Consider, for instance, the well-documented arc of social

1 Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen, "Decolonizing Civil Resistance," *Mobilization An International Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2015).

transformation that can be traced from the inception of Islam to the height of Islamic civilization between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. Islamic communities promoted religious co-existence, advanced the rights of women, created systems of social welfare and health care, and developed complex forms of urban planning and public infrastructure. They established the *Pax Islamica* (the Islamic Peace) which stretched from Spain to China, facilitated extensive trade, cultural exchange, and economic prosperity under a relatively stable and secure political order, and lasted roughly six centuries. They also promoted literacy and universal education, created the largest libraries the world had yet seen, gave birth to the first universities, and made major contributions to the fields of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine, engineering, the arts and architecture, poetry and literature — all of which laid the groundwork, in turn, for the European Renaissance and Enlightenment.²

Similar narratives can be told about the civilizational changes effected by Buddhism, Christianity, and other major religions. To deny the role of religion in transformative social processes is to ignore one of the primary forces acting on human history. Even in the modern world, faith communities have made determinative contributions to struggles for social justice, as alluded to earlier in this book.³ The abolition of modern racialized slavery is an obvious example.⁴ But countless movements

2 For excellent overviews of the transformative influence exerted by the rise of Islamic civilization, see Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Osman Bakar, *The History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (Great Shelford, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1999); Maurice Lombard, *The Golden Age of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2009).

3 The growing body of literature on this topic includes, for instance, Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Michael Palmer and Stanley Burgess, eds., *Religion and Social Justice* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020); Christopher Queen, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); Helene Slessarev-Jamir, *Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

4 Churchill Babington, *The Influence of Christianity in Promoting the Abolition Of Slavery* (Hungerford: Legare Street Press, 2022); Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank, eds., *Quakers and Abolition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Christopher Kellerman, *All Oppression Shall Cease: A History of Slavery, Abolitionism, and the*

have drawn inspiration from spiritual or religious traditions. The role of the Black church in the U.S. civil rights movement is another clear example.⁵ And, as this example illustrates, religious communities have especially rich experience with the construction of institutions that are independent of the state — or parallel institutions — which are complex and enduring expressions of constructive agency.⁶

A belated recognition is emerging among social movement scholars that the field has not taken seriously enough the nature and efficacy of religious movements in processes of transformative change.⁷ In addition, a broader discourse on post-secularism has recognized that the secularization thesis underpinning Western modernity has not been borne out.⁸ Contrary to that thesis, the human affinity for spiritual meaning and purpose has not been extinguished by modern scientific rationality. Nor has the human desire to come together in communities formed around such affinities. Within this discourse, a primary question people are grappling with is what constructive role can religion play in the contemporary public sphere?

Catholic Church (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022).

- 5 Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1986); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).
- 6 For a broader examination of this theme, see Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson, *Claiming Society for God: Religious Movements and Social Welfare in Egypt, Israel, Italy, and the United States* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).
- 7 David Snow and Kraig Beyerlein, "Bringing the Study of Religion and Social Movements Together: Toward an Analytically Productive Intersection," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David Snow et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2019); Fred Kniss and Gene Burns, "Religious Movements," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Mayer Zald and John David McCarthy, "Religious Groups as Crucibles of Social Movements", in *Social Movements in an Organizational Society: Collected Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987); Brandon Vaidyanathan, Christian Smith, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Jose Casanova, Hilary Davidson, Elaine Howard Ecklund, John H. Evans, Philip S. Gorski, Mary Ellen Konieczny, Jason A. Springs, Jenny Trinitapoli, Meredith Whitnah, "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology – A Mellon Working-Group Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2013).
- 8 Refer, for example, to Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013); Jürgen Habermas, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Craig Calhoun, Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, *Habermas and Religion* (New York: Polity, 2013).

With all of these considerations in mind, we turn to a modern religious movement — the Bahá'í Faith — that explicitly seeks to foster “radical change in the structure and functioning of human society”⁹ through a principled “commitment to constructive action”¹⁰ that employs prefigurative means.¹¹ In recent years, the Bahá'í Faith has begun to receive increased academic attention.¹² In the discussion that follows, we draw on this growing body of academic literature, along with primary Bahá'í texts, to illustrate what radical constructive agency can look like on a global scale.

As we acknowledged at the outset of this book, we also draw on decades of participatory experience and observations within the Bahá'í community. These experiences and observations are partly what led us to understand the significance of contributive justice as an ultimate end, and to recognize the many ways this commitment has been implicitly and explicitly expressed within the evolving discourse on social justice. These experiences and observations are also partly what led us to understand the significance of radical constructive agency as

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- 9 Universal House of Justice, *To all National Spiritual Assemblies* (4 January 1994), <https://www.bahai.org/r/283913957>
 - 10 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World* (18 January 2019), <https://www.bahai.org/r/482665630>
 - 11 Michael Sabet, “A Democracy Built on Communicative Action: Bahá'í Political Practice as a Prefigurative Resource for Institutional Effectiveness, Accountability, and Inclusivity,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 8:965428 (2023).
 - 12 See, for example, Robert Stockman, ed., *The World of the Bahá'í Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2022). For other recent examples of academic literature on the Bahá'í Faith, see Loni Bramson, ed., *The Bahá'í Faith and African American History: Creating Racial and Religious Diversity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019); Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel, eds., *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018); Louis Venters, *No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina's Bahá'í Community* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015); Michael Karlberg, “Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression,” *Peace & Change* 35, no. 2 (2010); Soli Shahvar, *The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'ís and Modern Education in Iran, 1899–1934* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009); Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B Fazel, eds., *The Bahá'ís of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies*, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies (London: Routledge, 2007); Moshe Sharon, ed., *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2004); Michael McMullen, *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also the peer-reviewed *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* and *Bahá'í Studies Review*.

a prefigurative means to that ultimate end, to recognize the ways some other movements have embodied radical forms of constructive agency, and to envision the possibility that a growing range of movements could increasingly center such means in the pursuit of contributive justice. In all of these ways, the experience of the Bahá'í community can serve as a lens that helps bring these possibilities into focus.

Before examining this experience, a few notes are in order regarding our own “positionality” as authors as well as our own epistemological commitments. Any community can be studied from either of two vantage points: from an emic (internal) or an etic (external) perspective.¹³ When modern social sciences emerged, many social scientists adopted etic perspectives in their study of “the other.” This was seen, for instance, when anthropologists from North Atlantic societies began studying diverse cultural communities from around the world through the lens of Western liberalism. By the latter half of the twentieth century, it became clear that while etic perspectives can be valuable, they have limitations. To understand a culture on its own terms, emic perspectives are also needed. Therefore, the study of Indigenous cultures by Indigenous people is now accepted and valued, as is the study of every culture by its own people — including the study of WEIRD cultures (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) by WEIRD people.¹⁴ Similarly, few people today deny the legitimacy of feminist scholars studying feminist movements, of Black scholars studying Black movements, of queer scholars studying queer movements, and so forth. Indeed, the value of these emic approaches is now widely recognized.

Following this recognition in the social sciences, emic and etic analyses are now widely understood as complementary, mutually informing, and partly overlapping rather than contradictory and mutually exclusive. Both are needed.

With that said, the following analysis proceeds from an emic perspective based on our combined decades of participation and observation within diverse Bahá'í communities scattered across four continents. This perspective was made clear in the Preface and

13 Thomas Headland, Kenneth Pike, and Marvin Harris, eds., *Emics and Etics: The Insider / Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990).

14 Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, “The Weirdest People in the World?,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 2–3 (2010).

Introduction to this book. Thus, though we approach this subject from an emic perspective, we welcome the complementary contributions of those who can study the Bahá'í experience from etic perspectives.

To date, such studies are rare. This is partly due to prevailing academic biases, alluded to above, against study of the religious motivations behind some powerful social justice movements. Also, among the few etic studies that exist, some are quite dated, so they do not capture the continually evolving experience, learning, and capacity-building of the Bahá'í community. Such is the case, for instance, with Peter Berger's 1954 sociological study titled *From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Bahá'í Movement*.¹⁵ A similar limitation can be found in Margit Warburg's *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Bahá'ís from a Globalisation Perspective*.¹⁶ Given that most of Warburg's research was conducted prior to 2002, her book is not current with the transformative developments the Bahá'í community has experienced over the past quarter of a century. Furthermore, as one reviewer notes, the book bases its conclusions about the global Bahá'í community largely on a study of the very small Danish Bahá'í community, which does not represent the global cultural diversity of Bahá'ís or the diversity of their experiences.¹⁷

Furthermore, some texts written in the guise of etic scholarship have been deeply polemical, motivated by desires to misrepresent and discredit the Bahá'í Faith for a range of reasons. Such polemics have been written, for instance, by a number of Christian missionaries and clerics.¹⁸ Such polemics have also been written by former Bahá'ís who were unsuccessful in their efforts to bend the evolution of the Bahá'í community according to their own preferences.¹⁹ In addition, the

15 Peter L. Berger, *From Sect to Church: A Sociological Interpretation of the Bahá'í Movement* (Unpublished PhD thesis, New School for Social Research, 1954).

16 Margit Warburg, *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Bahá'ís from a Globalisation Perspective*, Numen Book Series. Studies in the History of Religions (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2006).

17 Moojan Momen, "Book Review: Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Bahá'ís from a Globalisation Perspective," *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010).

18 See, for example, Samuel Graham Wilson, ed., *Bahaism and Its Claims* (New York: AMS Press, 1970); William McElwee Miller, "The Bahá'í Cult," *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, Ill.) 10 (18 February 1966).

19 See, for example, Juan R. I. Cole, "The Bahá'í Faith in America as Panopticon, 1963–1997," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (Washington, D.C.) 37, 2 (1998); Juan R. I. Cole, "Fundamentalism in the Contemporary U.S. Bahá'í Community," *Review of Religious Research* (Storrs, Conn.) 43, 3 (2002).

internet abounds with anti-Bahá'í polemics that reflect ideological disagreements with the Bahá'í teachings or misinformed criticisms of Bahá'í practices that lack merit on closer inspection. Since some of these criticisms are framed in terms of social justice, we feel compelled to address the most common ones. However, to avoid interrupting the arc of the argument we lay out in this chapter, we address those criticisms in Appendix B.

Despite the limited body of rigorous etic studies of the Bahá'í Faith, a growing body of academically peer-reviewed scholarship is emerging. The most current and comprehensive repository of such scholarship is the 648-page edited volume titled *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, which was published by Routledge in 2022.²⁰ This volume contains not only substantive overviews of the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, but also insightful examinations of recent developments within the movement. The discussion that follows draws extensively on this volume, alongside primary Bahá'í texts that illustrate the self-understanding of the Bahá'í community, and other relevant secondary sources.

We also want to note that our discussion is informed by a basic epistemological commitment that has been consistently expressed throughout this book in our treatment of all the thinkers and movements we have examined. We live in an era dominated by critique as a primary tool of analysis. In this regard, the sign of intellectual rigor in many academic circles today is the deconstruction of prevailing concepts, theories, norms, practices, and institutions. Such deconstruction seeks to expose hidden limitations, contradictions, and structures of power. This is valid work. We have engaged in it throughout our careers, and Chapter 1 of this book engages in it regarding the limitations, contradictions, and oppressive power relations embodied in Western modernity. But critique has its limitations, as Bruno Latour, Rita Felski, Elizabeth Anker, and others are increasingly pointing out in the growing discourse on postcritique.²¹ Critique is often premised on elitist or condescending assumptions that most people are duped by self-oppressing ideologies.

20 Stockman, *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*.

21 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004); Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

Endless cycles of critique can also foster disempowering forms of cynicism, suspicion, depression, and paralysis of will. Critique can be co-opted to become a tool of oppression by casting doubt on all truth claims and undermining the pursuit of truth. Critique often directs us to tear down rather than build up. Critique can make people afraid to speak, and afraid to propose creative solutions to the problems we face. Critique can make it difficult to appreciate the positive aspects of any object of critique. And critique can become formulaic, reflexive, and self-gratifying. None of this implies that critique lacks value. What Latour, Felski, Anker, and others are arguing is that critique should not be the only tool in our analytical toolbox, and intellectual activity should not be monopolized by or reduced to critique.

We concur with this argument. In addition, we share an epistemological commitment to learning from the frontiers of progressive thought and experience, rather than dwelling on the inevitable shortcomings of people who are trying to press forward on those frontiers. In this regard, skeptics may argue that the following discussion paints an idealized portrait of the Bahá'í community because it does not critically engage all of the complex social forces that come to bear in and on the community. So, before proceeding, let us briefly consider some of these forces.

Among the most fundamental forces acting within every community are the human instincts toward egoism and othering that have been discussed at numerous points in this book. We consider it a self-evident truth that every Bahá'í has to grapple with these instincts simply by virtue of being human. We consider it equally self-evident that the social forces these instincts give rise to will manifest themselves to varying degrees in varying contexts at various moments within the Bahá'í community. But our decades of experience and observations within the Bahá'í community give us confidence that the community is consciously and systematically striving to allay such instincts by fostering more ennobling human qualities that are latent in every human being and allay the corresponding social forces by developing norms and structures that moderate or supplant them. All of this is a central focus of Bahá'í training institutes and the programs of education and capacity building they foster.²² This work is, of course, time-

22 The curriculum employed by these trainings institutes is freely available and can be examined at <https://www.ruhi.org/en/materials-in-your-language>

consuming, difficult, and imperfect. But it is work that Bahá'ís derive meaning and purpose from. It cultivates personal and collective growth. Its communal nature affords opportunities for relationship building, accompaniment, encouragement, and joy. And the training institute's emphasis on the role of music and the arts in processes of personal and social transformation is a source of creativity and inspiration. Bahá'ís are thus committed to advancing on a path of systematic learning and capacity building in this regard, informed by ongoing cycles of action, reflection, and consultation.

Among the other fundamental forces operating in the Bahá'í community are the cultural norms and habits that people from every background bring with them into the community. In this regard, every culture has its strengths, and such strengths enrich Bahá'í communities. At the same time, every culture has inherited oppressive elements from the past, and such elements inevitably surface with nascent Bahá'í communities. Identifying and overcoming those cultural elements is a starting point for every Bahá'í community, because all Bahá'ís are culturally embedded.

In different cultural contexts, Bahá'ís struggle to root out legacies of patriarchy, racism, caste hierarchies, ethnic rivalries, class distinctions, and other lines of separation. In some contexts, Bahá'ís struggle to overcome the materialistic values and tendencies of the surrounding culture. Similarly, some Bahá'ís struggle to refrain from culturally encouraged forms of polarizing political rhetoric and behavior, or culturally encouraged forms of complacency, both of which are incoherent with Bahá'í principles. Such struggles can play out over multiple generations.

In addition, because Bahá'ís do not live apart from the societies they come from, the progress of the Bahá'í community is bound up with the progress of their respective societies — to which Bahá'ís also seek to contribute. Furthermore, given the internal diversity of Bahá'í communities, Bahá'ís inevitably struggle with the cross-cultural challenges that arise when diverse groups are learning to live and work together. But learning how to foster unity in diversity — how to harmonize differences within a framework of oneness — is a central aim of the Faith. Not surprisingly, Bahá'í training institutes and related processes seek to foster the individual, communal, and institutional

capacities needed to meet the challenges this entails. Again, this work is time-consuming and difficult, but also meaningful and rewarding, and Bahá'ís are committed to advancing on this path.

Another force Bahá'ís have to grapple with in some contexts are externally organized efforts to repress the Bahá'í community, alluded to above. The constructive resilience Bahá'ís strive to marshal in the face of repression, also discussed above, should not be romanticized. Thousands of Bahá'ís have been killed and many more have suffered significant personal loss and trauma under conditions of repression. Some have had to start new lives in foreign lands with all the challenges that can entail. The faith and commitment of some have been weakened. Some have retreated into complacency or materialism. Some have been drawn into contentious politics that are inconsistent with Bahá'í principles. Once again, Bahá'í training institutes and related processes seek to foster the individual and collective capacities needed to meet all of these challenges.

To Bahá'ís, all of the processes of learning and capacity building alluded to above are understood in a developmental manner. Etic observers are welcome to assess the fruits of these developmental efforts over time. And with this in mind, we turn now to an overview of the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith and an examination of those aspects of this movement that are most relevant to the dual theses advanced in this book.

Emergence of a Modern Religion

The Bahá'í Faith emerged in the mid-1800s, entirely outside the prevailing logic of the Western world or any of its colonial outposts. But it has since become global in scope. The story of this movement begins in the mid-nineteenth century, in Qajar Persia. Its initial protagonist was the twenty-five-year-old Alí Muḥammad, who boldly proclaimed that humanity was entering a period of transition toward an entirely new social reality, based on spiritual truths about human existence that would soon become manifest.²³ His claim spread

23 Omid Ghaemmaghami, "The Life of the Báb," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022); Nader Saiedi, "The Writings and Teachings of the Báb," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

like wildfire throughout the country, igniting a mass movement comprised of people from every social class, including large numbers of the marginalized and oppressed. Some of the religious and state authorities, seeking to preserve a status quo from which they derived great privileges, responded with brutal repression, often inciting violent mobs to carry out their will. An estimated ten to twenty thousand of the movement's protagonists were quickly killed. Within five years, Alí Muḥammad — known by his followers as the Báb, or “the Gate” to a new era — was publicly executed by a firing squad of seven hundred and fifty soldiers.

Shortly after his execution, in an effort to permanently eradicate the movement, the authorities arrested other leading protagonists who had survived the initial pogrom. One of these, another young man named Ḥusayn-‘Alí, was tortured, chained, and confined for months alongside others in a dark underground cesspool used as a dungeon. Ḥusayn-‘Alí — who came to be known by the name Bahá'u'lláh — survived this imprisonment but was stripped of all his possessions and exiled through an arrangement by which he became a perpetual prisoner of the Ottoman Empire.²⁴ Thus began a forty-year period of exile and imprisonment, ending with his death in 1892. However, throughout those years of imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh carried on a vast correspondence with protagonists of the continually expanding movement, which, by the end of his lifetime, had spread from North Africa to Burma. Through this extensive body of writing, he outlined the spiritual principles, social practices, and institutional arrangements that would come to define the Bahá'í Faith.²⁵

At the center of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are the principle of the oneness of humanity and the reciprocal principle of justice. From the confines of his imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh invited humanity to recognize the underlying causes of human suffering and oppression, the transitional nature of the age humanity was entering, and the need to reconstruct human civilization according to the principles of oneness and justice. “The winds of despair,” he wrote,

24 Moojan Momen, “Bahá'u'lláh,” in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

25 Steven Phelps, “The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,” in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divideth and afflicteth the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appeareth to be lamentably defective.²⁶

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.²⁷

Behold the disturbances which, for many a long year, have afflicted the earth, and the perturbation that hath seized its peoples. It hath either been ravaged by war, or tormented by sudden and unforeseen calamities. Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be [...] The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union [...] The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny.²⁸

The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.²⁹

Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.³⁰

It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.³¹

Before Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892, he appointed his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to succeed him as the center of a covenant that would ensure the unity and integrity of the movement he had set in motion.³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been exiled and imprisoned alongside his father from the age

26 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Center, 1982), 171.

27 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Tabernacle of Unity: Bahá'u'lláh's Responses to Mánickchí Sáhib and Other Writings* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2006), 5.

28 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 163–64.

29 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 157.

30 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. edn. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), 7.

31 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 166.

32 Necati Alkan, "'Abdu'l-Bahá `Abbas,'" in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022); Shahin Vafai, "Overview: The Central Figures, the Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Covenant," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

of eight, and he was not granted his freedom by the Ottoman authorities until he was sixty-five years old.³³ Under 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance, the cause spread to Europe and North America. And in his travels through North America in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the Bahá'í Faith in the following terms:

In this world we judge a cause or movement by its progress and development. Some movements appear, manifest a brief period of activity, then discontinue. Others show forth a greater measure of growth and strength, but before attaining mature development, weaken, disintegrate and are lost in oblivion. Neither of these mentioned are progressive and permanent.

There is still another kind of movement or cause which from a very small, inconspicuous beginning goes forward with sure and steady progress, gradually broadening and widening until it has assumed universal dimensions. The Bahá'í Movement is of this nature.³⁴

Over the decades that followed, the Bahá'í community became global in scope. It is now a microcosm of humanity encompassing some eight million people from every social, economic, ethnic, national, and religious background on earth, residing in more than 100,000 localities.³⁵ It has grown to encompass over 2,100 distinct ethnic groups and, in a little over 180 years it has become the second most geographically widespread religion on the planet (after Christianity).³⁶ Given its globally integrated administrative structure, it is quite likely the most diverse organized community on the planet. And it is steadily growing. It is a faith community, yet it has no clergy. Rather, its evolution is guided by collective bodies that are elected at the local, national, and international levels through a uniquely democratic process that will be examined in more depth near the end of this chapter.³⁷

33 Alkan, "'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbas"; Vafai, "Overview: The Central Figures, the Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Covenant."

34 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, trans. Howard MacNutt, 2nd edn. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), #17.

35 Naisohn Arfai and Robert Weinberg, eds., *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2024), 429; Peter Smith et al., "Part 6: History and Spread of the Bahá'í Community (Chapters 41 to 51)," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

36 These conclusions are found in the World Christian Database, which is widely considered the most rigorous external source for global religious demographics. See <https://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>

37 Todd Smith, "The Bahá'í Administrative Order," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed.

Bahá'í Discourse and Practice

Bahá'ís are focused on the construction of peaceful and just patterns of community life along with the social practices and institutional structures needed to support them. They seek to harmonize relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions within a framework of organic interdependence — or oneness — that recognizes and values diversity as a source of human flourishing.³⁸ In this work, they adopt contributive means that invite every soul to become a protagonist in the unfolding story of humanity. This work has been summarized in the following manner by the Universal House of Justice,³⁹ which is the globally elected governing body of the worldwide Bahá'í community:

Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind and the convictions underpinning it, only a few of which are mentioned here as a means of illustration: that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men; that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few; that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances; that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism; that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul; that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated; that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues,

Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

38 Robert Stockman, "Oneness and Unity," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

39 Todd Smith, "The Universal House of Justice," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity; that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part.⁴⁰

To mobilize and train ever-expanding numbers of protagonists to advance this cause, Bahá'ís have developed a network of grassroots training institutes that currently operate in 329 regions that encompass the planet.⁴¹ These training institutes function through a decentralized system of local study circles in which participants reflect together on the nature and purpose of their lives, strive to develop qualities and skills that empower individual and collective progress, are introduced to the framework of principles and practices that inform the movement, learn to analyze the social forces operating in their local context, consult about steps they can take on the path of social transformation, and learn how to accompany each other as a source of courage and insight on that path. As this system evolves, it is empowering growing numbers from all walks of life — especially among the most marginalized segments of every society — to advance the movement of populations in context-sensitive and culturally distinct ways.

For instance, a Bahá'í training institute became established in a deeply patriarchal village with a caste system that had been governed for thousands of years by male elders from the highest caste. The village was struggling with material poverty and social decay caused, in part, by multiple layers of oppression internal to the culture and, in part, by political and economic forces originating in distant lands. A small group of youth, male and female, drawn from all castes, recognized the training institute as a means of transforming the conditions of their local existence

40 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of Iran* (2 March 2013), <https://www.bahai.org/r/386360789>. The Universal House of Justice is the globally elected body that guides the affairs of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

41 Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV*, 429; Michael Karlberg and Todd Smith, "A Culture of Learning," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

while contributing to a global movement that seeks to effect long-term global structural transformations. The local actions they began to engage in as a result of their training began to attract other youth, and a movement began to stir within the village. A small group of male elders from the upper caste recognized the decaying state of the village, saw the positive contributions of those youth and, despite some initial reservations, wanted to learn more. Though they occupied privileged positions in their village, they could see that profound change was needed if their village was to survive. They were invited to learn more about this movement by attending a study circle that would be facilitated by a teenage girl from the lowest caste. Historically, this group of male elders from the upper caste would never have consented to being in the same room as this young woman, let alone being tutored by her. But attraction to this movement caused them to put aside their prejudices and participate in a process that seeks to gradually dismantle the caste system, establish the equality of women and men, and give youth a voice in the decision-making processes of the village — among other aims. This is an illustrative example of what grassroots processes of empowerment can look like.

Similarly, a Bahá'í training institute became established in an urban neighborhood struggling with a legacy of racial segregation, economic precarity, powerful social forces that can numb and distract its residents (from addictive drugs to addictive social media algorithms), and growing levels of social isolation, anxiety, and depression among its youth. A small group of families recognized the training institute as a means of transforming the conditions of their local existence while contributing to a global movement that seeks to transform the distant forces acting on them. The local actions they began to engage in as a result of their training attracted others, and a movement stirred within the neighborhood. Again, this is what grassroots processes of empowerment can look like.

Furthermore, the two illustrative examples alluded to above are linked to each other, and to countless other instances of a broadly similar nature, through a global process of learning and capacity building. But each instance of a grassroots movement stirring in this way takes on its own context-sensitive form with culturally distinct aims and challenges.

Processes such as these are being advanced in an increasing number of localities across the planet through a systematic sequence of coordinated

global plans aimed at fostering and supporting the grassroots initiatives of an ever-expanding number of individuals and groups.⁴² The insights these processes generate are internally documented through a variety of print and audio-visual media that are publicly accessible to all who are curious — whether literate or not.⁴³

As this growing body of documentation demonstrates, the moral vision that inspires and guides this movement stands in striking contrast to largely materialistic visions of progress that tend to prevail in the West. Bahá'ís see all of humanity on a collective developmental path from conditions of relative social and spiritual immaturity toward conditions of relative maturity.⁴⁴ The latter condition, Bahá'ís believe, will be gradually achieved through recognition of our ever-increasing interdependence on a global scale and the construction of a corresponding social order that harmonizes our unity and our diversity. Toward this end, Bahá'ís assume a dynamic coherence between the spiritual, social, and material dimensions of human existence.⁴⁵ Material conditions are important, but they reflect underlying spiritual and social conditions.

Bahá'ís thus believe that material prosperity for all can be achieved only as our social reality comes to embody profound normative truths — or spiritual truths — about human flourishing.⁴⁶ In this regard, the

42 For discussions of the role global plans play in the work of the Bahá'í community, see International Teaching Centre, *The Five Year Plan and The One Year Plan 2016–2022: Summary of Achievements and Learning* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2024); Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV*, chapter 2; June Manning Thomas, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi*, 2 edn. (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2024).

43 See, for example, Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV*; Bahá'í International Community, *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development* (New York: Bahá'í International Community, 2023); International Teaching Centre, *The Five Year Plan and The One Year Plan 2016–2022: Summary of Achievements and Learning*. For videographic documentation of this growing body of experience, see Bahá'í World Center, *An Expansive Prospect* (2023), <https://www.bahai.org/video/expansive-prospect>; Bahá'í World Center, *Glimpses of a Hundred Years of Endeavor* (2022), <https://www.bahai.org/video/glimpses>; Bahá'í World Center, *A Widening Embrace* (2018), <https://www.bahai.org/video/widening-embrace>; Bahá'í World Center, *To Serve Humanity* (2014), <https://www.bahai.org/video/to-serve-humanity>; Bahá'í World Center, *Frontiers of Learning* (2013), <https://www.bahai.org/video/frontiers>

44 Sasha Deghani, "Progressive Revelation," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

45 Ian Kluge, "The Physical and Spiritual Dimensions of Human Nature," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

46 Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative*

Bahá'í ontology shares some similarities with the Gandhian ontology alluded to in Chapter 4. As we saw then, Mohandas Gandhi believed that spiritual truths such as the law of love are just as real and have just as much of an effect on human existence as the law of gravitation and other physical laws. It was in this context that he understood his efforts as a set of "experiments with truth." Bahá'ís share this broad ontological understanding. For instance, in relation to that same law of love, 'Abdu'l-Bahá described it as

the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things. Love is the one means that ensureth true felicity both in this world and the next. Love is the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms. Love revealeth with unfailing and limitless power the mysteries latent in the universe. Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world, and the shedder of imperishable glory upon every high-aiming race and nation.⁴⁷

Elaborating this theme a century later, in relation to a Bahá'í approach to social change, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity's age of maturity. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. Infuse it into every neighborhood and social space in which you move to build capacity to canalize the society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.⁴⁸

Foundations of Social Change (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020).

47 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, trans. Committee at the Bahá'í World Center and Marzieh Gail (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1982), #12.

48 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the United States* (22 July 2020), <https://www.bahai.org/r/870410252>

Bahá'ís thus believe that human flourishing depends on progressively learning how to apply spiritual truths to the betterment of the human condition within conditions characterized by contributive justice. Only through such a capacity building process can we foster more mature intrapersonal relationships with our own instincts and subjectivities; more mature social relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions; and more mature ecological relationships between humanity and the rest of the natural world. Legislative measures and economic policies, important as they are, cannot achieve these things on their own. In this regard, Bahá'ís understand that “there are no shortcuts” on the difficult path toward a more mature social order and the myriad relationships — between individuals, institutions, and communities — that constitute it.⁴⁹

Within this organic vision of progress, Bahá'ís liken the current era of human existence to the turbulent age of adolescence in the life of the individual — a difficult transitional period on the path toward maturity. In the collective life of humanity, this transitional period is characterized by the accelerating disintegration of anachronistic social forms, alongside accelerating processes of integration by which new social forms are emerging through expressions of constructive agency. The longer humanity clings to immature social forms and delays the construction of a more peaceful and just social reality, the greater the scale of human suffering and ecological degradation we will witness. Such is the Bahá'í perspective on this moment in history and what it asks of us.⁵⁰

The mature social order Bahá'ís aspire toward is neither a projection of Western liberalism, nor is it a preconceived order Bahá'ís seek to impose on others. Rather, they understand that a radically new framework of human civilization will need to emerge from the diverse contributions of all the world's people.⁵¹ Bahá'ís thus operate from an expansive understanding of contributive justice.

Such a process of world-building, Bahá'ís understand, can only

49 Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World* (2010), <https://www.bahai.org/r/292070091>

50 Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World* (2010).

51 Universal House of Justice, *To all National Spiritual Assemblies* (12 December 2011), <https://www.bahai.org/r/767646244>; Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World* (Riḍván 2010).

advance by drawing out the most ennobling and emancipatory aspects of every cultural tradition; by leaving behind the immature and oppressive aspects of every cultural tradition; and by developing the capacity of diverse communities to learn their way forward toward the creation of new patterns of existence.⁵² At the center of this process is the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge about the betterment of the human condition. Elaborating on this theme, the Universal House of Justice explains that

there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization — each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation.⁵³

Within this framework of contributive justice, it should be clear that Bahá'ís do not claim to have all the solutions to the mounting problems facing humanity. Rather, they see themselves as part of a global ecology of movements for social transformation that will, over many generations, have to engage in sacrificial and sustained labor, learning how to construct the more mature social reality humanity aspires toward. In this regard, Bahá'ís strive to adopt a humble posture of learning through which they seek to make distinctive contributions alongside other movements.⁵⁴

Bahá'í contributions are characterized, in part, by learning how to pursue transformative change in a manner that transcends the divisive patterns of contentious politics. The Bahá'í cause is thus characterized by a purely constructive program that Bahá'ís seek to advance not only

52 Universal House of Justice, *To all National Spiritual Assemblies* (2011).

53 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World* (Ridván 2010).

54 Karlberg and Smith, “A Culture of Learning”; Michael Karlberg, “The Pursuit of Social Justice,” in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV, 2006–2021*, ed. Naisohn Arfai and Robert Weinberg (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center Publications, 2024); Michael Karlberg and Derik Smith, “Responding to Injustice with Constructive Agency,” in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

globally, but across centuries.⁵⁵ In other words, Bahá'ís are in it for the long run. This is a marathon, not a sprint. In this regard, Bahá'ís have already demonstrated their endurance, along with their ability to maintain the unity and integrity of the movement.

Within this long-term vision, Bahá'ís conceptualize their efforts in terms of three broad interrelated areas of endeavor. The first of these is building radically new patterns of community life and the institutional structures needed to support them, as alluded to above.⁵⁶ Through these community-building efforts, Bahá'ís seek to contribute to humanity's search for new patterns of existence around which a more mature civilization can coalesce.

The second broad area of endeavor is social action focused on the immediate social and economic needs of the wider populations Bahá'ís live within. This is approached not through a social service modality, but through processes of systematic capacity building within populations to address the many challenges they face. On this front, Bahá'ís seek to couple long-term commitments to civilizational change with the urgent alleviation of human suffering in the present through educational endeavors, projects of mutual aid, cooperative enterprises, and similar initiatives.⁵⁷

The third broad area of endeavor is contributing to the prevailing discourses of society in thoughtful and constructive ways that, alongside the progressive contributions of others, can help lay the epistemological and semiotic foundations for a more mature global civilization. In this regard, Bahá'ís recognize the discursive dimension of human existence and the central role that language and thought play in shaping social reality.⁵⁸

55 Karlberg and Smith, "Responding to Injustice with Constructive Agency."

56 For an excellent overview of the state of this work, and the nature of these patterns, see Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV*.

57 For an overview of this area of endeavor, see Bahá'í International Community, *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development*; Office of Social and Economic Development, *Social Action* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 26 November 2012).

58 For an overview of this area of endeavor, see Shahriar Razavi, "Bahá'í Participation in Public Discourse: Some Considerations Related to History, Concepts, and Approaches," in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections of Bahá'í Thought and Practice*, ed. Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).

To avoid schism or co-optation across space and time, the community is constituted around a covenant — alluded to above — that ensures a clear locus of evolving guidance, at the center of which is now a globally elected governing body: the Universal House of Justice.⁵⁹ Yet the entire system of Bahá'í governance and collective decision-making functions according to the principle of subsidiarity, by which all decisions are made as close to the grassroots as possible.⁶⁰ Only those matters requiring global or national coordination are made at those levels. This arrangement has ensured the unity, integrity, coherence, and vitality of the movement — while fostering cultural diversity within it — since the passing of Bahá'u'lláh over one hundred and thirty years ago.⁶¹

The community, as a whole, is thus developing a global culture of learning in which new experience and insight are continuously generated through grassroots patterns of action, reflection on action, consultation, and study. When proven insights are identified through these methods, they are distilled and shared across the global network of training institutes alluded to above. This bidirectional system empowers ever-expanding numbers of protagonists within a global movement that is steadily gaining momentum through iterative processes of learning through action.⁶²

For instance, given their commitment to long-term processes of social transformation, Bahá'í community-building efforts are especially attentive to the formative periods of human development: childhood, adolescence, and youth.⁶³ As any developmental psychologist will attest, these periods play a critical role in shaping the self-understanding,

59 Smith, "The Universal House of Justice."

60 Smith, "The Bahá'í Administrative Order."

61 For an overview of the covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, the role it has played in the evolution of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and its current expression through the Universal House of Justice, see Adib Taherzadeh, ed., *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1992); Smith, "The Universal House of Justice."

62 Karlberg and Smith, "A Culture of Learning."

63 Filip Boicu and Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddan, "Education in Pedagogy and Practice," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022); Soli Shahvar, *The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'ís and Modern Education in Iran, 1899–1934* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009); Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2016); Janet Khan and Peter Khan, *Advancement of Women: A Bahá'í Perspective* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2003); Paul Lample, *A Still More Superb Mission: Exploring a Framework for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2025).

behavioral habits, relational patterns, normative commitments, and conceptual schemas that we carry into adulthood.

Bahá'ís have thus been advancing processes of systematic learning about the education of children, the empowerment of adolescents, and the training of youth as agents of social change — with special attention paid to the education of girls and other historically marginalized segments of any given society.⁶⁴ Bahá'ís pursue this work through grassroots processes that are non-sectarian and are open to all. In other words, the recipients of such education, as well as those who are trained to offer it, include people from all faiths or no faith, and from every demographic background. And there is no expectation that any of these participants should come to identify as a Bahá'í.

These systematic educational processes are now unfolding in tens of thousands of localities around the world, and the global network of training institutes that support the development of the requisite capacities have been structured so they can continue scaling up indefinitely.⁶⁵ Because such efforts are all organized around the principle of the oneness of humanity, they seek to supplant egoism and othering with more ennobling human qualities such as altruism and inclusion, beginning in a child's earliest formative years. They continue to reinforce such efforts among adolescents, while also fostering their nascent abilities to collectively analyze the social forces at play within a community and formulate simple action plans that contribute to the betterment of the community. And they continue to reinforce all of these things among older youth, while strengthening their abilities to consult, act, and reflect with others on more complex paths of learning about community transformation.

By seeking to address the root causes of prejudice, injustice, and oppression through these and other means, the Bahá'í community is engaged in a radical form of constructive agency.⁶⁶ Though the full

64 Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*; Karlberg, "The Pursuit of Social Justice."; Filip Boicu and Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam, "Education in Pedagogy and Practice," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022); Geeta Gandhi Kingdon, "Education of Women and Socio-Economic Development," *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 7 (1997); Anne Pearson, "The Equality of Sexes," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

65 Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*, Volume XXXV, 429.

66 Karlberg and Smith, "Responding to Injustice with Constructive Agency."

breadth and depth of this constructive program are beyond the scope of this brief overview, the evolving work of the community and its growing ranks of like-minded collaborators is thoroughly documented in an ongoing manner and is, as mentioned previously, available to all who care to look.⁶⁷

However, the experience of this diverse global movement should not be oversimplified or romanticized. Like people everywhere, some of its protagonists struggle to overcome self-limiting or oppressive values, beliefs, and norms inherited from the myriad cultures they hail from. Others struggle to overcome the powerful influences of materialism promoted by global capitalism and its ideological underpinnings. In addition, the remarkable diversity of the community is, predictably, a source of intercultural challenges that can take time and patience to work through. And the universal promptings of the human ego are forces that all Bahá'ís have to struggle with because these susceptibilities are woven into the fabric of human nature.

In short, the Bahá'í community is comprised of real people who have to struggle with all the forces that arise within, or act upon, movements of all types. But the measures of a movement include its ability to continually learn and grow; to maintain its unity, integrity, coherence, and vitality over time; and thereby to advance steadily toward the ends it seeks. And by all of these measures, the Bahá'í cause warrants respect for its progress to date and for the distinctive contributions it is making within the ecology of transformative movements playing out across the planet.

Repression and Resilience

Given the radical nature of this constructive program, Bahá'ís have faced many forms of repression. In the land of its birth, Iran, the movement

67 Refer, again, to sources such as Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV*; Bahá'í International Community, *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development*; International Teaching Centre, *The Five Year Plan and The One Year Plan 2016–2022: Summary of Achievements and Learning*. For videographic documentation of this growing body of experience, see Bahá'í World Center, *An Expansive Prospect*; Bahá'í World Center, *Glimpses of a Hundred Years of Endeavor*; Bahá'í World Center, *A Widening Embrace*; Bahá'í World Center, *To Serve Humanity*; Bahá'í World Center, *Frontiers of Learning*.

has faced wave after wave of persecution, often brutal and violent, and such repression continues to this day.⁶⁸ But in the face of such repression, Bahá'ís have developed powerful forms of resilience as they advance their constructive program undeterred. And their constructive resilience has attracted the widespread admiration and support of observers from near and far, while causing the ranks of the movement's protagonists to continually grow.⁶⁹

In this regard, the Bahá'í commitment to radical constructive agency, combined with their principled avoidance of contentious politics, offers an important insight. In the discourse on contentious resistance, it is sometimes assumed that repression can be avoided by adopting a purely constructive strategy while refraining from contentious politics, even as it is sometimes assumed that this approach will limit the efficacy of a movement.⁷⁰ This logic may apply to timid forms of constructive agency that do not invite people to construct radical alternatives to the prevailing social order. But the experience of the Bahá'í community illustrates that as more radical constructive programs advance, they are perceived by some vested interests as threats to the prevailing order, and repression will ensue.⁷¹ Indeed, the Bahá'í community explicitly anticipates that it will experience opposition and repression in many more countries over time, as its work becomes increasingly visible.⁷²

In the face of such repression, the Bahá'í community has learned to accept suffering and sacrifice as the cost of transformative social change and to continue its constructive work undeterred even when Bahá'ís are stigmatized and ostracized, or stripped of their rights and freedoms, or when violence rains down on them.⁷³ Though some forms of repression can slow the community's work, the community has consistently demonstrated that no form of repression can halt its efforts. In this

68 Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam, "Religious Persecution of Bahá'ís under the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

69 Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression."

70 Sørensen, Vinthagen, and Johansen, *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, 195.

71 Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression."

72 Research Department of The Universal House of Justice, *Crisis and Victory: A Compilation of Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1988).

73 Michael Sabet, ed., *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies: Special Issue on Constructive Resilience* 30, no. 3 (2020).

regard, the community has faith that in its long-term perseverance, it can outlast even the most oppressive regimes. Indeed, given the global nature of the Bahá'í movement, even if it could be entirely eliminated in one country for some period of time, it would return as soon as conditions permitted and pick up where it left off with its constructive program. These are all aspects of the constructive resilience of the Bahá'í community — a concept that has become central to Bahá'í discourse and practice.⁷⁴ Moreover, experience has demonstrated that repression tends to increase, rather than decrease, the spread of this constructive movement.⁷⁵

Given the fact that Bahá'ís experience repression, some observers might be tempted to describe the form of agency Bahá'ís exert as a form of resistance. Yet the language of resistance is not central to Bahá'í discourse. On the contrary, within the Bahá'í conceptual framework, constructive agency constitutes the exertion of true power, in relation to which the repression they sometimes experience is the expression of an ultimately futile form of resistance by those seeking to preserve the status quo. Thus, when primary Bahá'í texts invoke the language of resistance, it tends to be in this manner. Alternatively, primary Bahá'í texts also speak of the need to resist the baser forces, or instincts, operating within the self. Indeed, this is the “everyday resistance” Bahá'ís are called toward, as they strive to develop more ennobling qualities or capacities. But primary Bahá'í texts do not prescribe collective strategies of contentious resistance to oppressive power centers.

The Bahá'í experience thus suggests an important distinction can be made between a nonviolent strategy of contentious resistance that actively seeks to provoke confrontation and a nonviolent strategy of radical constructive agency that does not seek to provoke confrontation but accepts the fact that repression may occur. As discussed in Chapter 5, the former strategy — especially when expressed through acts of civil disobedience — employs performative public acts intended to provoke moral dilemmas for the authorities. In response, the authorities must either ignore the disobedience and thereby implicitly acknowledge the unjust and unenforceable nature of specific social arrangements, or they can respond with repression and thereby lose moral standing and

74 Sabet, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies: Special Issue on Constructive Resilience*.

75 Karlberg, “Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression.”

political support among many observers — thus enabling the movement to gain momentum and exert greater pressure. Either way, the movement “wins” the encounter, and there is no way for the authorities to save face.

In contrast, radical constructive agency is not concerned with provoking public confrontations and moral dilemmas. While accepting that repression may occur, Bahá'ís always leave the door open for authorities, and for all who benefit from the status quo, to recognize the interdependent nature of human interests and embrace a transformative vision in which all can flourish. And, as the Bahá'í experience demonstrates, the latter outcome is not unheard of. Indeed, it can be seen from the earliest days of the movement, when some of the leading religious and state authorities embraced the cause, ceded many privileges to advance it, and, in some cases, lost their lives on this path.⁷⁶

A New Type of Social Actor

In light of the preceding discussion, Bahá'ís are learning to distinguish between two broadly different forms of political agency. On one hand, Bahá'ís refrain from engaging in any forms of political action that could be characterized as a “contest for power,” from partisan political organizing to campaigns of contentious resistance.⁷⁷ Such means are not coherent with the ends they seek, which include learning how to advance beyond the immature patterns of conflict, division, and competition that have characterized so much of humanity's early development. On the other hand, long-term Bahá'í efforts to construct a radically new social order — including more cooperative, just, and mature forms of governance — is an eminently political project. Thus, as the Universal House of Justice has written, the Bahá'í cause is clearly “a political enterprise” in the latter sense.⁷⁸ Elaborating on this theme, they explain:

76 Moojan Momen, “A Chronology of some of the Persecutions of the Bábís and Bahá'ís in Iran, 1844–1978,” in *The Bahá'í World 1979–1983*, vol. XVI, Prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1986); H. M. Balyuzi, ed., *Eminent Bahá'ís in the Time of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985); Nabíl-i-A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970).

77 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World* (28 November 2023), <https://www.bahai.org/r/708460753>

78 Universal House of Justice, *Letter to an Individual Bahá'í* (27 April 1995), <https://www.bahai.org/r/266883293>

The term “politics” can have a broad meaning, and therefore it is important to distinguish between partisan political activity and the discourse and action intended to bring about constructive social change. While the former is proscribed, the latter is enjoined; indeed, a central purpose of the Bahá’í community is social transformation.⁷⁹

The purely constructive program of the Bahá’í community can thus be understood as a radical expression of political agency, because it seeks to address the root political causes of oppression and injustice in human affairs. Yet this is also a movement that draws on the same spiritual wells of insight and inspiration that have motivated so many transformative religious movements of the past.⁸⁰ In this regard, it is a modern movement that seeks to reconcile the spiritual and practical dimensions of human existence in an age of ever-increasing global interdependence. And, as alluded to previously, it seeks to do this within a framework that, by design, cannot be imposed on others.⁸¹ This framework can only be embraced in a voluntary manner by those for whom the framework enkindles faith, hope, meaning, purpose, will, and the courage to act.

In this regard, the global network of Bahá’í training institutes seek to raise up “a new type of social actor”⁸² by seeking “to empower each person to become a protagonist in the building of a new world.”⁸³ Such training derives from a specific vision of the individual it seeks to raise up, and it is instructive to hear how the Bahá’í community articulates this:

This vision draws inspiration from the Bahá’í writings, which suggest that, in order to act effectively at this moment in history, individuals must be imbued with a strong sense of purpose that impels them to take charge of their own spiritual and intellectual growth and contribute to the progress of society. This can be seen as a *twofold moral purpose*.

Briefly, intellectual and spiritual growth is understood in terms of the development of those vast potentialities that distinguish humanity from

79 Universal House of Justice, *Letter to a Political Scientist* (23 December 2008), <https://www.bahai.org/r/683764105>

80 Christopher White, “Bahá’í Spirituality and Spiritual Practices,” in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022); Varga Bolodo-Taefi, “Mysticism,” in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022); Mikhail Sergeev, “Progress of the Soul: Life After Death,” in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

81 Universal House of Justice, *Letter to an Individual Bahá’í* (27 April 1995).

82 Ruhi Institute, *Statement of Purpose and Methods*, <https://www.ruhi.org/en/statement-of-purpose-and-methods>

83 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá’ís of the World* (18 January 2019).

the rest of creation. Some of these are related to the powers of the human mind, which enable it to discover the mysteries of nature, produce beautiful works of art, and express noble sentiments and thoughts. Others are what may be called spiritual qualities — attributes deeply rooted in the individual that have to do with his or her inner essence, such as trustworthiness, honesty, generosity, and loving-kindness...

On a societal level, the twofold purpose finds expression through dedication to promoting the welfare of the entire human race. This requires that individuals lend their strength to processes that counteract the destructive forces that are undermining the foundations of human existence and align themselves with the forces of integration that are leading humanity towards a new social order.⁸⁴

This understanding of the individual is, in turn, embedded in a broader conceptual framework — including a coherent and compelling theory of change — that the training both derives from and seeks to impart. Though some elements of this framework have already been alluded to, it is again instructive to hear how the Bahá'í community articulates this:

The conceptual foundations of the institute process can be found in the Bahá'í teachings, particularly those related to the course and direction of history and the nature of social change. According to these teachings, humanity has entered a stage of unprecedented challenge and promise as it moves toward maturity. While its physical evolution has followed the dictates of the laws of nature, there has also been a spiritual dimension to its long evolution, and the hallmark of the age of maturity will be the unification of the human race in a world civilization that pays due regard to both the material and spiritual dimensions of life. Thus, the processes and structures of this civilization must necessarily embody a host of spiritual and moral ideals. Among these are, for example, the elimination of all forms of prejudice, the promotion of the equality of men and women, the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty — ideals in consonance with the principle of the oneness of humankind, the central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith.

The emergence of such a civilization, the Bahá'í writings further suggest, will not come about through attempts at bettering society alone, to the exclusion of the individual. Rather, its rise is understood in terms of dual transformation — a complex set of interactions involving profound changes at the level of the individual and in the structure of society.⁸⁵

84 Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*, Volume XXXV, 118. (Italics in the original.)

85 Arfai and Weinberg, *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*, Volume XXXV, 115.

Bahá'ís understand that such a civilization will not emerge exclusively through their own efforts. On the contrary, they believe it will emerge through the interaction of complex social processes, including the efforts of countless individuals, groups, and movements. In this context, Bahá'ís seek to make a distinctive contribution that hastens its emergence.

Bahá'ís thus recognize that they do not have all the answers to the many vexing questions facing humanity. What they have is a reflective mode of learning through action that advances within an evolving framework of principles and practices. This enables them to collectively test ideas against reality, distill proven approaches into growing bodies of practical knowledge, and transmit that knowledge to growing numbers of protagonists through their global system of training institutes — with the professed aim of radical social transformation.

Consider, in this light, the many pragmatic questions raised in previous chapters of this book, regarding how we might collectively advance toward the horizon of contributive justice: What forms of collective action constitute effective means to this end? To what extent are such actions context-dependent? Are there any universal normative truths about transformative collective action that cut across diverse contexts? What can be learned about the means of transformative change by looking to the past, and what means need to be newly developed? How might more expansive conceptions of power, agency, and resistance inform our efforts? How might we foster the conscious awareness, will, volition, and sense of historical agency needed to mobilize ever-expanding circles of protagonists? To what extent might meaningful processes of social change require suffering or sacrifice on the part of those pursuing such change? To what extent might specific means of social change serve as unifying, coherent, and prefigurative forces capable of advancing us toward the horizon of contributive justice? To what extent might specific means contribute to change at the level of individual hearts and minds, culture, institutions, and other social structures? How might we cultivate emancipatory forms of subjectivity capable of supplanting internalized forms of oppression? How might we supplant elemental psychic forces such as egoism and othering, which are perennial causes of oppression, with ennobling human capacities for altruism and inclusion? And how might all of this be done more effectively, at scale, in sustained ways? These questions,

and many more, are among those the Bahá'í constructive program seeks to generate answers to, in concert with other likeminded movements.

Clearly, this work has a political dimension, in the broad sense of the term. Consider, in this regard, a Bahá'í view on the oppressive social forces acting in the world today. As the Universal House of Justice has written, "Humanity is battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious prejudice or the pinnacles of rampant materialism."⁸⁶ Thus they invite Bahá'ís to "reflect upon the destructive forces at work that are destabilizing equilibrium across the face of the globe... Power is seized and exercised in a manner that twists or obscures the truth to serve the special interests of the few at the expense of the many."⁸⁷ They further assert that "true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul."⁸⁸ And, in this regard, they direct a special appeal to youth, urging them "to consider deeply those societal forces... that aim to distract them from significant social change, weaken their commitment to service, ensnare them in consumerism, and dissuade them from belief in their own God-given capacity and that of others."⁸⁹

It is in this context that one can understand the following comment by the Universal House of Justice.

It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.⁹⁰

86 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World* (Ridván 2008), <https://www.bahai.org/r/577301675>

87 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of Iran* (1 October 2014), <https://www.bahai.org/r/413695147>

88 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of Iran* (2 March 2013).

89 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'í Youth in Iran* (29 January 2014), <https://www.bahai.org/r/539319429>

90 Universal House of Justice, *To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors*

Bahá'ís thus recognize that many forces of oppression in the world today are organized, and it is not possible to supplant organized forces of oppression without an organized response. As previously alluded to, Bahá'ís are organized through a system of elected and appointed institutions and agencies that coordinate their efforts on local, regional, national, and global scales.⁹¹ To illustrate how this system is political, in the broad sense of that term, it is worth examining in some depth the radically new model for conducting elections that Bahá'ís have pioneered.⁹²

The Bahá'í electoral system is eminently democratic in spirit, yet it is entirely non-partisan and non-competitive. In brief, all adult community members are eligible to vote and are eligible to be voted for. And every member has the reciprocal duty to serve if elected. Nominations, campaigning, and all forms of vote solicitation are prohibited. Voters are guided only by their own conscience as they exercise complete and real freedom of choice in voting for those they believe best embody the qualities of recognized ability, mature experience, integrity, and selfless service to others — and as they take into account the importance of diversity among those serving on elected bodies.

Through a plurality count, the nine individuals that receive the most votes are called to serve as members of a decision-making body, even though they never sought to be elected and even though they had other plans and priorities. And, as individuals, they accrue no special privileges within the community. Because no one seeks election, elections are a call to service and sacrifice rather than a pathway to power and privilege, and the process is thereby shielded from the material corruptions — including the influence of money — to which all competitive electoral systems are susceptible.⁹³

All decision making within these elected bodies is, in turn, guided by consultative principles that render decision making a unifying rather than divisive process.⁹⁴ Participants regard diversity as an asset and seek

(28 December 2010), <https://www.bahai.org/r/367193901>

91 Smith, "The Bahá'í Administrative Order."

92 Arash Abizadeh, "Democratic Elections without Campaigns? Normative Foundations of National Bahá'í Elections," *World Order* 37, no. 1 (2005).

93 Michael Karlberg, "Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?," *The Bahá'í World, 2005-2006: An International Record* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 2007).

94 Todd Smith and Omid Ghaemmaghami, "Consultation," in *The World of the Bahá'í*

to inform themselves by soliciting the perspectives, concerns, interests, and expertise of all segments of the community. They also strive to transcend the limitations of their own egos and perspectives, strive to express themselves with care and moderation, strive to raise the context of decision-making to the level of principle, and strive for consensus but settle for a majority when necessary. In the case of majority votes, the minority supports the implementation of the decision on the premise that only through unified implementation can the efficacy of a decision be tested and the decision be corrected or refined as needed.

Bahá'ís have been refining this system for over a century now and learning how to foster the personal qualities and attitudes, as well as the social norms and practices, that support it. In other words, they have been fostering a culture that is coherent with, and makes possible, the functioning of the structure. For instance, within the Bahá'í community, any semblance of campaigning or vote solicitation is perceived as an indicator that the person engaged in such behavior lacks the mature and selfless qualities needed for effective service to the community. These principles are so deeply established that Bahá'ís refrain from discussing who they will vote for before an election. They also refrain from discussing who they voted for after an election. It is understood that such talk violates the spirit and efficacy of Bahá'í elections.

By design, this system of governance cannot be imposed on others. It can only be adopted in a supremely voluntary manner. So Bahá'ís make no effort to impose their system on contemporary societies. Rather, they offer the system to others as a model — as proof of concept — that elections need not be defined by the logic of the culture of contest. And third-party observers have already noted the merits of the model.⁹⁵ Bahá'ís thus envision the long-term prospect that, through purely constructive means, such models might eventually supplant competitive electoral models and the dysfunctional contests of power they give rise to.

The long-term nature of this work does not, however, preclude efforts to ameliorate human suffering in the present. Rather, Bahá'ís

Faith, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

95 See, for example, United Nations Institute for Namibia, *Comparative Electoral Systems & Political Consequences: Options for Namibia*, ed. N. K. Duggal, Namibia Studies Series No 14 (Lusaka: United Nations, 1989); Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

are learning about forms of ameliorative social action that are coherent with, and help prefigure, their long-term vision of a more just social order. And in all of this — short-term ameliorative efforts and long-term world-building efforts — Bahá'ís seek to foster a sense of urgency because, as the Universal House of Justice states, “The urgency to act is impelled by the world’s desperate condition.”⁹⁶

Such is the political agency — the radical constructive agency — Bahá'ís are engaged in. Such is their organized response to the forces of oppression operating in the modern world. And such are the attitudes, qualities, understandings, and skills that characterize the new type of social actor they are striving to raise up.

96 Universal House of Justice, *To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors* (29 December 2015), <https://www.bahai.org/r/574068462>

Summary

The argument in this book is complex. In this concluding chapter, we distill its essential elements so the argument can more easily be assessed in its entirety.

Our argument is premised on the assumption that modernity can be understood as an axial age, or an age of fundamental transition in human affairs. It is an age in which we, as a species, have been developing scientific, technological, and economic powers that have transformed the material conditions of our existence. But we have not yet developed the social and spiritual maturity these new powers require of us, and our current recklessness imperils our existence. The imperative of this transitional age is to move beyond the violent, unjust, unsustainable, and anachronistic patterns of human existence that are still so prevalent. This cannot be achieved through the universalization of any existing way of life. It can only be achieved through the construction of new patterns of global coexistence, informed by the diverse experiences, insights, and contributions of all the peoples of the world.

In this context, we advance two central theses in this book. First, we argue that an expansive conception of contributive justice enables us to envision a common horizon — or ultimate ends — toward which diverse movements for social justice all appear to be oriented. This expansive conception of contributive justice entails a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives.

Second, we argue that, in this transitional period of human history, contentious means of pursuing social justice have reached a point of diminishing returns, and we now need to center radical constructive agency as a primary means of bringing about a more just social order in which every individual and group can develop their latent capacity to

contribute. By radical constructive agency, we are referring to collective forms of agency that entail actively building new social and political forms capable of supplanting anachronistic ones — new social forms that address the root causes of injustice and oppression. This argument does not imply that contentious means no longer have any value. They may. Our thesis is simply that we need to center radical constructive agency if we want to bring about the conditions of contributive justice alluded to above.

Today, the root causes of injustice and oppression run very deep, including some of the foundational values, assumptions, ideas, and relationships that constitute modernity. Modernity has, of course, been characterized by many laudable advances in human creativity and productivity, the arts and science, technologies and social innovations. But these advances have not accrued evenly within or between diverse populations. Vast numbers of people today live in intolerably oppressive conditions. And the entire global order is becoming socially unstable and ecologically unsustainable.

These conditions have given rise to a global ferment in human affairs, leading to the proliferation of diverse movements for social change across the planet. The proliferation of these movements has, in turn, given rise to vigorous debates about the ends and means of social change.

The first part of our argument thus focuses on the ends that contemporary movements for transformative change tend to be oriented toward. We argue that social justice must be understood as a primary end. In support of this assertion, we briefly survey the proliferation of movements across the planet and examine how they embody diverse aspirations for social justice. We examine the inherent human sense of justice that gives rise to such movements, along with factors that can confound the development of a mature sense of justice — most notably the base human instincts toward egoism and othering.

We then trace the evolution of thought about social justice and survey the diverse ways it is conceptualized within various traditions of thought. We derive, from these diverse insights and perspectives, a positive conception of social justice that might serve as the common horizon alluded to above: the horizon of contributive justice toward which we can collectively learn our way forward.

If contributive justice entails a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and

thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, then it is important to recognize that some of these conditions may manifest differently in different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, such conditions can be understood as latent social possibilities that can be collectively discerned and acted upon in efforts to advance toward them. This conception appears to encompass the many aspects of social justice that diverse movements all appear to be oriented toward.

The second part of our argument builds on the preceding analysis by exploring the means for pursuing the ends of contributive justice. For much of the last two centuries, movement activists have debated the question of means, as have moral and political philosophers who share an underlying concern for social justice. Such debates rest on the shared premise that, in the face of systemic injustices, passivity is a moral failure. We have a duty to act. But how?

In seeking answers to this question, we begin by delineating one of the primary conceptual axes around which the debate over means tends to revolve: the violence and nonviolence axis. Much of this debate can be understood as an argument over whether the ends justify the means. At the center of this argument is the question of whether violence is ever morally or pragmatically justified in the pursuit of social justice. One of the most significant concepts to emerge in this debate is the concept of prefiguration, which suggests that the means of social change inevitably prefigure or shape the ends.

The debate regarding violent and nonviolent means has given rise to a growing body of empirical research regarding the comparative outcomes of each. Though such research is still at a nascent stage of development, it offers some provisional evidence that nonviolent means may be more effective at achieving lasting social change. But these findings are contested, which invites us to recognize the theory laden nature of social observations. Competing conceptual frameworks rest on different assumptions about social reality, giving rise to different concepts, questions, observations, and interpretations. At this nascent stage in the “science” of social change, the existence of competing frameworks may be productive — if pursued with a posture of humility on a path of collective learning.

This posture of humility invites us, in turn, to consider the possibility that the moral and pragmatic questions that perennially arise in debates

about violence and nonviolence may not be distinct questions at all. To suggest there is a moral foundation to human existence is to suggest that collective human flourishing can only be achieved by discovering the latent normative principles that govern human existence, and by learning how to apply these principles more systematically in efforts to construct a more just social reality. This, in itself, is a hypothesis that can be tested over time by collectively acting on it and assessing the efficacy of those actions — or their relative fruitfulness in bringing about the conditions of social justice.

Following our discussion of violence and nonviolence, we delineate a second conceptual axis around which the debate over means also tends to revolve. This is the less recognized but equally significant axis of contention and construction. Many social scientists today use the concept of contentious politics to denote approaches to social change that lie outside conventional political processes and mechanisms. Contentious politics thus refers to any unconventional collective actions employing adversarial means to resist, confront, disrupt, dismantle, or overthrow established social norms and structures, laws and policies, or governing regimes.

Such approaches tend to be premised on the assumption that powerful elites who control conventional political outcomes will never willingly give up their unjust privileges. Rather, such privileges have to be taken from them against their will, and this requires direct confrontation. In contrast, the concept of a constructive program denotes a collective effort to build the more just society one seeks right in the midst of the old social order, in an effort to supplant the latter. This latter concept is closely associated with the concept of prefiguration mentioned earlier.

Though contentious and constructive means are distinct, some movements have combined them, and some people argue that a movement for transformative social change must combine them to be effective. However, the evidence is not clear on this point. Counterexamples can be offered. Humility again seems to be in order. Furthermore, within a complex ecology of movements that are all seeking transformative social change, it is reasonable to conclude that some movements can make distinctly valuable contributions by adopting exclusively constructive means. Indeed, such contributions may be essential to the construction of a more just social order.

After delineating the two conceptual axes mentioned above, we turn our attention to the dominant conceptions of power and resistance that tend to inform the preceding debates, and we demonstrate the need to adopt more expansive conceptions of both, which can inform more expansive conceptions of collective agency. Contemporary debates over the means of social change tend to be premised on agonistic conceptions of power. Such conceptions are embodied, for instance, in the tendency to conflate nonviolent means with contentious politics. Even activists and scholars who are beginning to take seriously the concept of constructive programs often conceptualize such programs within an agonistic frame, giving rise to expressions such as “constructive resistance.” These agonistic conceptions of power are deeply entrenched in Western thought.

When power is conceived only in these narrow terms, it obscures mutualistic forms of power that can be potent forces for transformative social change. These latter forms of power play an especially significant role in constructive programs that seek to prefigure a more mature social order characterized by mutualism, cooperation, nurturing, contributive justice, and shared prosperity. They are powers of attraction, not coercion; they are characterized by abundance, not scarcity; they are creative, not destructive. And when we adopt this more expansive conception of power it expands, in turn, our understanding of resistance. In the face of a movement that draws on the creative, attractive, and mutualistic powers of the human spirit to construct a more just social order that can supplant an oppressive one, resistance denotes the efforts of those who seek to preserve the old social order by attempting to repress the constructive program. A more expansive conception of power thus helps us recognize that resistance is a bidirectional concept. In this regard, transformative constructive programs are not “the resistance.” Rather, they should expect to encounter resistance.

These expansive conceptions of power and resistance bring into focus the paradox of protest within the prevailing culture of contest. In short, many contemporary forms of injustice and oppression are expressions of the modern tendency to assume that conflict and competition should be the organizing principle of most social institutions and many social relationships. We see this in partisan political systems, adversarial legal systems, capitalist economic systems, grade-based education systems, and even in many organized forms of recreational and leisure.

Structuring social institutions as contests of power gives an inherent advantage to those who enter the contests with the most power. This gives rise to myriad social injustices, which give rise in turn to myriad movements for social justice. When such movements adopt contentious politics as their primary means, they are adopting the means prescribed by the same culture of contest that is the source of the injustices they are reacting to. In doing this, they can inadvertently reinforce and perpetuate the underlying logic of the culture of contest. This is the paradox of protest in a culture of contest.

This paradox can be understood as a central problematic in late modern debates over ends and means. Transcending this paradox requires an expanded social imaginary and corresponding forms of social praxis. This becomes possible when we recognize the transitional nature of modernity — or when we see modernity not as the end of history but as the transition to an era of ever-increasing global interdependence that can only be sustained through the construction of new social forms.

From this perspective, we can recognize how the social Darwinist logic that continues to assert itself in the modern world has become deeply maladaptive for humanity as a whole. It cannot be sustained. Yet it cannot be transcended through means that embody the same logic of social contestation. What is required are means that derive from a fundamentally different logic. To do this, we will have to center forms of radical constructive agency that seek to entirely supplant the culture of contest. This can occur not through processes of political contestation but through the construction of new social forms, the attraction of growing numbers of people to those new social forms, and the attrition of old social forms that will eventually collapse from their own irrelevancy — notwithstanding the efforts of some to prop them up as long as possible.

Such means draw on the most ennobling and creative powers of the human spirit. They cultivate our capacities for altruism and inclusion in ways that can displace our baser instincts for egoism and othering. In these and other ways, such means begin to prefigure the more peaceful and just social reality most people aspire toward.

By viewing the discourse on means through these lenses, we are able to bring the concept of radical constructive agency into clear focus. Radical constructive agency implies the construction of new social forms that address the root causes of the challenges we face, including the

root causes of injustice and oppression. A growing body of experience is beginning to offer insight into such efforts. Among the more commonly cited examples are the Zapatista movement in Mexico and the landless workers movement in Brazil, both of which combine contentious politics with ambitious constructive programs that are creating new patterns of community life and new institutional structures to support them.

To illustrate radical constructive agency that is not coupled with contentious politics, we examine the experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community, which constitutes a movement seeking to advance profound social transformation through contributive means that prefigure the ends of contributive justice. Bahá'ís are creating new patterns of community life and new institutional structures to support them. They have developed forms of training and resilience that enable them to continually expand the circle of those contributing to this constructive work, within a movement that has been undeterred by the resistance and repression it has encountered from those seeking to preserve anachronistic and oppressive social forms through any means necessary.

Some advocates of contentious politics argue that when constructive agency is divorced from contentious politics it becomes apolitical. It allegedly avoids the "real" work or the "hard" work of social change and is thus prone to irrelevance. But as the Bahá'í experience illustrates, radical constructive agency entails the deeply political work of worldmaking and holds great promise in the struggle for social justice. What limits constructive agency are approaches that are too timid, or that lack the radical imagination needed to motivate and sustain the radical work of worldmaking even in the face of repression.

Some advocates of contentious politics also argue that purely constructive programs are too slow, and it is urgent to address human suffering in the present through contentious politics. We concur that urgent action is needed. But contentious politics is not the only means of acting with urgency to address human suffering in the present. Projects of mutual aid, mutual empowerment, and community building can all be approached with urgency in ways that ameliorate human suffering while simultaneously prefiguring a more just social order. Collective action within a long-term framework of constructive social transformation can also be approached with urgency. Indeed, when

such efforts are forestalled in the name of urgent contentious actions, the scale of future human suffering may increase, because urgent contentious actions are unable to address the root causes of human suffering within the culture of contest we have inherited from the past. Therefore, if reducing net human suffering is the metric by which we gauge the efficacy of our means, and this requires us to end perennial cycles of injustice and oppression, the resulting calculus should support the kinds of radical constructive agency we have been examining. What could be more urgent than pressing forward with this worldmaking work?

Again, this is not an argument against contentious politics. It is an argument for recognizing the complex ecology of movements for transformative change. Such movements can employ a range of means. In this transitional period of human existence, we would do well to begin centering radical constructive agency as a primary means — and as a contributive means capable of prefiguring the ends of contributive justice.

One way to think about this is to understand movements as forms of community action research. Different movements operate within different frameworks that suggest different means, require the development of different capacities, and generate different insights. Some of these will be complementary. But the only way to assess the merits of each is to see how fruitful it proves to be, over time, in contributing to the construction of a more just social reality. What this requires is a spirit of humility, embodied in a posture of learning, wedded to a sense of urgency.

It is in this spirit that we invite our readers to take seriously the possibilities of radical constructive agency. It is neither a passive nor apolitical response to injustice and oppression. Rather, it is a distinctive form of organized political action. It requires a new kind of social actor raised up through new forms of training. It requires the exercise of creative initiative and moral courage. It requires the sacrifice of time, energy, and sometimes much more. And it beckons every soul to recognize themselves as protagonists capable of contributing to the unfolding story of humanity.

Appendix A

As we acknowledge in Chapter 3, the underlying concept of social justice our entire argument rests on is not without skeptics. Furthermore, our thesis that contributive justice can be understood as a common horizon toward which diverse movements for social justice implicitly or explicitly orient may be met with skepticism, by some, due to the universality of this assertion. Finally, the social body metaphor we employ in our conception of contributive justice may also be met by some skepticism due to the way such metaphors can also be invoked for oppressive purposes. We did not examine these concerns in Chapter 3 because doing so would have disrupted the arc of an argument that had already grown long and complex. But each of these sources of skepticism are addressed, in turn, below.

Skepticism Regarding the Underlying Concept of Social Justice

Within the Western liberal logic of the culture of contest, as discussed in Chapter 7, some have argued that the concept of social justice is a spurious or harmful concept. Two broad versions of this argument tend to dominate. The first is based on commitments to capitalist “free” markets. The second is based on deeper commitments to social Darwinism.

Leading proponents of the capitalist argument against social justice include influential figures such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick. Friedrich Hayek was the progenitor of this family of critique, and his views shaped the thinking of those who followed, so let us consider his arguments as illustrative.

Hayek was an economist and philosopher committed to individualism,

liberalism, capitalism, and a minimal state.¹ In his lifetime he witnessed the rise of Soviet-style centrally planned economies. He also witnessed the rise of Western concerns about social justice, with their tendency to focus narrowly on distributive justice. And he associated distributive justice with socialism and centrally planned economies.

In this context, Hayek argues that social justice is a delusional idea. Market economies, he asserts, are complex self-organizing systems that spontaneously aggregate and coordinate countless individual decisions through neutral price mechanisms that disperse information and knowledge across an infinite number of economic interactions. In contrast, he argues that the limited information and knowledge available to any state cannot possibly substitute for this. Therefore, he concludes, all efforts by states to interfere with markets in the pursuit of social justice will suffer from a profound deficit of information and knowledge, which will undermine market efficiency and productivity. Furthermore, such efforts will expand state power; impose social engineering schemes that are poorly informed, politicized, and morally arbitrary; reduce the individual's freedom to express personal preferences through market choices; and reduce economic benefits for all. For these reasons, he asserts that social justice is a "mirage."²

Though Hayek's argument may be well-intentioned, it has a number of foundational flaws that may not have been as apparent in his time as they are today. First, it conflates the broad concept of social justice with the much narrower concept of distributive justice. It then conflates distributive justice with central economic planning. It also conflates the concept of markets with the ideology of capitalism. Finally, it assumes that individual preferences are freely constituted in capitalist economies. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Conflating the broad concept of social justice with the much narrower concept of distributive justice is problematic for all of the reasons outlined in Chapter 2 of this book, which need not be restated here. It is sufficient to point out that the "mirage" Hayek refers to resides partly in his own imagination, and partly in a Western liberal discourse that

1 Bruce Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge: An Intellectual Biography of F.A. Hayek* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2 Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume II: The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

tends to view social justice in a highly reductive manner that obscures many of the most significant aspects of social justice.

Even if one accepts such a reductive view of social justice, it is still problematic to conflate distributive justice with centrally planned economies. The distributive dimensions of social justice can be fostered through a wide range of measures that do not require a Soviet-style centrally planned economy. Such measures include progressive taxation; investments in essential services like public education and universal health care; investments in public infrastructure for transportation, energy, and the like; investments in university research; investments in public media and internet access; and countless other measures that are compatible with market economies. All of these measures can contribute to distributive justice, yet none of them require centrally planned economies. Indeed, most democratic states today implement some combination of these measures alongside market economies, and many of these measures boost economic productivity.³

Hayek's conflation of markets with capitalism is equally problematic. There are many ways to structure markets. Capitalism is only one way.⁴ Capitalism structures markets in ways that privilege the accumulation of capital over all other values. Moreover, even a capitalist market is not a "free" market that operates independent of the state. Capitalist markets can only exist as a result of numerous state constructs and interventions. For instance, a modern investor-financed for-profit corporation is a legal construct created and enforced by states. This structure places a fiduciary responsibility on corporations to maximize shareholder profit over all other values. Through most of the twentieth century, if one needed to attract investors to finance a corporation within a capitalist economy, this was the only state-sanctioned structure available. In more recent years, radical forms of constructive agency have given rise to new legal constructs such as Benefit Corporations, which can attract investors who want to balance financial profit with other values such as environmental

3 Joseph Stiglitz and Jay Rosengard, *Economics of the Public Sector*, 4th edn. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co Inc, 2015); Pierre-Richard Agénor, *Public Capital, Growth and Welfare: Analytical Foundations for Public Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

4 David Schweickart, *After Capitalism*, 2nd edn. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Gary Chartier and Charles Johnson, eds., *Markets Not Capitalism* (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2011).

stewardship and the well-being of workers.⁵ Benefit Corporations are market structures. Yet according to the definition of capitalism offered above they are not capitalist structures because they do not privilege the accumulation of capital over all other values. Other non-capitalist market structures include worker-owned cooperatives, profit-sharing arrangements, and credit unions. All of these market structures can be enabled or constrained by state legislation and can be incentivized or disincentivized through tax policies and other measures. And none of this requires a Soviet-style centrally planned economy.

States also structure markets in more fundamental ways that, once recognized, expose the fallacy of “free” markets. At the most fundamental level, the currencies that modern markets depend on are state constructs. In turn, currency valuations and interest rates are both structured by state monetary policies and other measures. The property laws and contract laws on which modern markets depend are also structured and enforced by states. Modern markets also depend on countless forms of state infrastructure, including roads, rails, airports, traffic laws, energy infrastructure, and so forth. Modern markets are even structured by state investments in public education and health care, because these investments subsidize worker training and worker health care costs. Finally, it has been understood by most economists for generations that, in many sectors, markets are naturally inclined toward monopoly control, and monopolies have deeply distorting effects on the proper functioning of markets. Therefore, many states adopt structural measures to limit the formation of market-distorting monopolies. For all of these reasons and others there is no such thing as a “free” market that is not structured in fundamental ways by states. The question is not whether states should structure markets, but how.

The question of how states structure markets even applies to the market pricing mechanisms, and to the dispersed knowledge and information they embody, which Hayek rests his argument on. It is well understood by economists today that market pricing mechanisms fail to account for a range of costs that are external to processes of production.⁶

5 Rick Alexander, *Benefit Corporation Law and Governance: Pursuing Profit with Purpose* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017).

6 Tom Tietenberg and Lynne Lewis, *Environmental Economics*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2024); Arthur Cecil Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare* (Charleston, SC:

Such externalities include, for instance, the costs of pollution that are born by all those living downstream or downwind from polluting factories, and the costs of disposal that are born by populations at the end of product lifecycles, and the environmental costs of climate-warming emissions, and the healthcare costs arising from antibiotic overuse in livestock operations, and even the physical and mental health costs incurred by girls and women through their objectification and hyper-sexualization in the production of commercial media content. The invisible hand of market pricing mechanisms cannot, by itself, factor in any of these external costs. Markets lack dispersed knowledge and information regarding all of these negative externalities and others. Yet such externalities result in market distortions, which can only be corrected by state interventions that insert external costs back into pricing mechanisms. This can be done through externality taxes, cradle-to-grave manufacturer responsibilities, and other policy measures. Thus, we can see the problematic nature of Hayek's assertion that the dispersed knowledge and information embodied in "free" market pricing mechanisms leads to maximal market efficiency. In the absence of state interventions, such mechanisms often lead to profound market distortions.

Finally, consider Hayek's assumption that individual preferences are freely constituted in capitalist economies, and that the role of market pricing mechanisms is to coordinate these natural preferences in the most efficient and productive ways possible for the maximal public benefit. The problematic nature of this assumption becomes clear when we acknowledge the powerful instruments employed in modern capitalist economies to artificially stimulate consumer demand and manipulate consumer preferences to maximize profits. Indeed, these are the primary functions of modern marketing and advertising industries.⁷

Before these industries emerged in their modern form, capitalism had solved the problem of how to supply the goods and services needed for entire populations to live comfortable lives. Of course, capitalism

Legare Street Press, 2022).

7 William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products & Images of Well-Being*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1997); Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Mark Bartholomew, *Adcreep: The Case Against Modern Marketing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

did not solve the associated problem of distributive justice. But let us bracket off that major concern to focus on another. In the process of solving the under-supply problem, capitalism created an over-supply problem. To address this new problem, entire industries were created to stimulate artificially high levels of demand, and then to align consumer preferences with profit-maximizing imperatives. As these industries matured, they began systematically exploiting insights and methods pioneered by twentieth century psychologists and behavioral scientists. Marketers and advertisers began wielding these insights and methods to shape consumer attitudes, values, and behaviors. By the twenty-first century, armies of such experts were being trained to exploit massive bodies of consumer data — harvested by a proliferation of internet and retail surveillance technologies — to shape consumer desires and preferences with ever-increasing predictive accuracy.⁸ All of this has been coupled with armies of creative talent focused on attracting and retaining consumer attention. And it is rapidly being coupled with artificial intelligence tools that promise to further increase the predictive accuracy needed to manipulate consumer desires and preferences.

The existence of these increasingly sophisticated industries directly undermines Hayek's assumption that individual preferences are freely constituted in capitalist economies, and that the role of market pricing mechanisms is to coordinate these natural preferences for the maximal public benefit. Today, market pricing mechanisms increasingly coordinate industry-manipulated consumer preferences for maximal private benefit and maximal consumer debt. Furthermore, these artificially stimulated levels of consumption are exacerbating many of the ruinous social and ecological externalities alluded to above — which tend to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable segments of every society.

All of the considerations discussed above undercut Hayek's argument that the concept of social justice is misguided and harmful because it interferes with "free" markets. Though Hayek calls the concept of social justice a mirage, it would be more accurate to call the concept of free markets a mirage.

This is not to say that markets have no role to play in a just economy.

8 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

Based on all the available evidence about what markets are good at, it appears they will have a very important role to play. But this recognition invites important questions that need to frame systematic processes of social learning. What kinds of goods and services are best provided by markets? What kinds are best provided by the state? What kinds are best provided by the voluntary efforts of individuals, families, and communities? And what kinds are best provided by hybrid variations of the above? Such questions invite us to move away from the dogmatic convictions that derive from capitalist (and Communist) ideologies, and they beckon us forward on a path of learning.

Recognizing that markets probably have an important role to play in this context also leads to other important questions: How can we structure markets to reward excellence, creativity, innovation, and productivity while ensuring the well-being of workers and consumers, ensuring the health of our natural environment, and ensuring distributive justice? And how can we also structure markets to ensure contributive justice? These are not ideological questions. They are pragmatic questions that derive from a straightforward commitment to human wellbeing that beckons us forward on a path of learning.

On these latter questions, Michael Sandel offers salient insights into why narrow concerns for distributive justice have to be embedded within broader concerns for contributive justice. Progressive politicians, he points out, have long been promising (though not necessarily delivering) a greater measure of distributive justice to working-class voters whose income and employment opportunities have been shrinking while unimaginable wealth has been concentrating among economic elites. Important as those distributive promises are, what most politicians across the ideological continuum have failed to recognize is that “what these voters want even more is a greater measure of contributive justice — an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that goes with producing what others need and value.”⁹ “Work,” Sandel points out, “draws citizens together in a scheme of contribution and mutual recognition.”¹⁰

In this regard, the labor market is a system of public recognition. In a

9 Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 206.

10 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, 209.

just labor market, the remuneration assigned to different forms of work would reflect the relative contribution of a given form of work to the common good. However, capitalist “free” markets offer deeply distorted hierarchies of recognition. For instance, within these hierarchies, those who care for and educate young people tend to be among the lowest paid workers, while those who manipulate consumer desires and preferences to maximize corporate profits tend to be very well paid — even when the products they are selling directly harm people’s health and degrade the environment.

The modern finance industry may be the clearest example of these labor market distortions. This is a global industry that, in the United States alone, now generates more than 30% of all corporate profits and its employees earn 70% more than comparably qualified workers in other elite industries.¹¹ In theory, the finance industry contributes to the betterment of the human condition by allocating capital for the production of socially valuable goods and services. The finance industry is also presumed to contribute to job creation. However, in capitalist “free” market economies, much of the industry is focused on highly profitable forms of financial engineering (e.g., complex derivatives, credit default swaps, and other esoteric financial instruments) that have no social or economic value, create no meaningful jobs, siphon capital away from productive enterprises, and can destabilize entire economies. Such activity causes massive sums of money to change hands for the purpose of extracting and concentrating wealth. And it has been estimated that in the U.S. and the U.K., this kind of nonproductive financial activity now comprises 85% of financial flows.¹² As Rana Foroohar explains,

All this finance has not made us more prosperous. Instead, it has deepened inequality and ushered in more financial crises, which destroy massive amounts of economic value each time they happen. Far from being a help to our economy, finance has become a hindrance. More finance isn’t increasing our economic growth—it is slowing it.¹³

As Sandel asserts, this insight has economic, moral, and political implications.

11 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, 216.

12 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, 218.

13 Rana Foroohar, *Makers and Takers: The Rise of Finance and the Fall of American Business* (New York: Crown Business, 2016), 13.

Economically, it suggests that much financial activity hinders rather than promotes economic growth. Morally and politically, it reveals a vast discrepancy between the rewards the market bestows on finance and the value of its contribution to the common good. This discrepancy, along with the disproportionate prestige accorded those engaged in speculative pursuits, mocks the dignity of those who earn a living producing useful goods and services in the real economy.¹⁴

In other words, while markets have an important role to play in fostering human prosperity, capitalist “free” markets lead in directions that directly undermine contributive justice.

But there is another argument against the concept of social justice, which also derives from the Western liberal culture of contest, that is more extreme. This argument can be traced back to the tenets of social Darwinism articulated by Herbert Spencer.¹⁵ Herbert Spencer was a nineteenth-century intellectual who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” after reading Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Spencer understood survival of the fittest primarily in competitive terms, and he argued that this applies not only to the biological evolution of species but also to the social evolution of groups or populations. Thus, social Darwinism was born.

Social Darwinism was then epitomized in the 1896 book *Might is Right or The Survival of the Fittest*, written under the pseudonym Ragnar Redbeard, who is generally assumed to be Arthur Desmond. As the author of that book explains, “it is proposed to prove in this book that strife, competition, rivalry, and the wholesale destruction of feeble types of men is not only natural but highly necessary.”¹⁶ Elaborating on this theme, he writes

Give blow for blow, scorn for scorn, doom for doom; with compound interest liberally added thereunto. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, aye four-fold, a hundredfold. Make yourself a Terror to your adversary and when he goeth his way, he will possess much additional wisdom to ruminate over. Thus shall you make yourself respected in all the walks of life, and your spirit — your immortal spirit — shall live, not in an

14 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, 218.

15 Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State* (New York: Appleton, 1893); Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (London: John Chapman, 1851).

16 Ragnar Redbeard, *Might is Right or The Survival of the Fittest* (Chicago, IL: Adolph Mueller, 1986), 16.

intangible paradise but in the brains and thews of your aggressive and unconquerable sons. After all, the true proof of manhood is a splendid progeny; and it is a scientific axiom that the timid animal transmits timidity to its descendents.

If men lived “like brothers” and had no powerful enemies (neighbors) to contend with and surpass, they would rapidly lose all their best qualities; like certain oceanic birds that lose the use of their wings, because they do not have to fly from pursuing beasts of prey. If all men had treated each other with brotherly love since the beginning, what would have been the result now? If there had been no wars, no rivalry, no competition, no kingship, no slavery, no survival of the Toughest, no racial extermination; truly what a festering “hell fenced in” this old globe would be?¹⁷

Though these views will sound extreme and callous to most readers, they have implicitly or explicitly informed many arguments justifying the historical displacement of Indigenous peoples and the attempted erasure of Indigenous cultures, the historical enslavement of Africans and others, the eugenics movement and the holocaust, the maintenance of permanent underclasses in capitalist economies, the exclusion or expulsion of immigrants in the name of cultural purity, and wars of territorial aggression. Indeed, at the time this book was being written, such views appeared to be reasserting themselves in some parts of the world.

Redbeard may have articulated a more extreme version of social Darwinism than Herbert Spencer. But Redbeard’s views illustrate how influential Spencer’s underlying premises have been. Those premises have been summarized by Samuel Fleischacker as follows:

Spencer believes that the state should avoid helping the poor because (1) the poor are composed of a group of people unfit for survival who cannot be helped much anyway; (2) the process of social evolution, in which the unfit die out, will if left alone vanquish poverty; (3) society is uncontrollable, so government attempts to solve the problem of poverty are likely to fail; (4) such government attempts will corrode the virtue of charity; (5) such attempts will lead to all sorts of legal problems since their goal is necessarily unclear; and (6) such attempts will override property rights, which it is the prime purpose of government to protect.¹⁸

17 Redbeard, *Might is Right or The Survival of the Fittest*, 19–20.

18 Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 92.

As it turns out, these premises are incompatible with the prevailing theory of biological evolution, which recognizes mutualism and cooperation as powerful forces that also drive evolutionary fitness.¹⁹ So it should not be surprising that these social Darwinist premises are also incompatible with the concept of social justice. Social justice rests on a very different set of premises, which are fully compatible with the evolving science of evolution. These premises might be stated as follows (with the numbers below corresponding to Fleischacker's numbers above):

(1) Widespread poverty and related social ills are, in large part, contingent social arrangements rather than intrinsic or inevitable features of human existence; (2) the evolutionary fitness of our species is attributable, in large part, to its remarkable capacity for cooperation, and prevailing social ills can be vanquished through greater cooperation, not through unfettered competition; (3) good governance is not merely about trying to control anarchic social forces, it is about fostering mature processes of social learning, capacity building, self-regulation, and development; (4) fostering good governance and fostering human virtue are not mutually contradictory processes, they are mutually dependent processes; (5) reducing the extremes of wealth and poverty is a clear goal and good governance can contribute to its achievement; and (6) the prime purpose of governance is to promote human flourishing in a holistic sense, and systems of property can be adjusted or refined according to this principle and according to the related principle that some natural and cultural resources should be managed as a commons.

The premises articulated immediately above, it should be noted, are compatible with a purely secular framework. The following additional premises might be added by some religious thinkers:

(7) Every soul is characterized by latent nobility and equal moral worth, and every society has a spiritual obligation to foster the conditions by which every soul can realize its latent potentialities; (8) the oneness of humanity, in all its diversity, is a spiritual truth that we should strive to translate into social reality; (9) social justice is a requisite of oneness; and (10) striving to construct a social order that embodies the reciprocal

19 Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998); Lynn Margulis and Rene Fester, eds., *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Martin Nowak and Roger Highfield, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution, and Why We Need Each Other to Succeed* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Lynn Chiu, *Extended Evolutionary Synthesis: A Review of the Latest Scientific Research* (West Conshohocken, PA: John Templeton Foundation, 2022).

principles of oneness and justice in ever-greater measure is a spiritual duty by which it becomes possible not only for individual souls to reflect the Divine Will for humanity, but for society as a whole to reflect the Divine Will for humanity.

Of course, neither of the two immediately preceding sets of premises can be proven today in any empirical sense. What we can do is rationally choose to operate from them and, over time, we can assess their fruitfulness in terms of human flourishing. We, the authors of this book, choose to do this. And we see growing ranks of social justice advocates, secular and religious, operating from broadly similar premises.

Skepticism Regarding the Universality of Contributive Justice

Even if we dismiss the preceding arguments against social justice that derive from the Western liberal culture of contest, some may still question the universality of our thesis that contributive justice can be understood as a common horizon toward which diverse movements for social justice implicitly or explicitly orient. Such skeptics may ask how this thesis can be reconciled with the arguments we discuss, in Chapter 2, in support of cultural and epistemological diversity, autonomy, and self-determination? Stated another way, how can any common normative horizon be reconciled with a cultural pluriverse and an ecology of knowledge systems?

We believe it can be reconciled by rejecting the extreme moral relativism that has become so prevalent in our “post-modern” era. Cultural diversity need not be conflated with extreme relativism, as many of those who advocate a cultural pluriverse point out. Walter Mignolo, Arturo Escobar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Raimon Panikkar, Vandana Shiva, Syed Hussein Alatas, Syed Farid Alatas, Vineeta Sinha, Alberto Guerreiro Ramos and other related thinkers reject extreme moral relativism.²⁰ Indeed, all of their arguments are premised on

20 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*

universal moral commitments to valuing, fostering, and protecting cultural and epistemological diversity along with other universal moral commitments such as social justice, human dignity, and the equal worth of all peoples.

In the absence of any shared moral commitments, the conditions needed to create and sustain a meaningful pluriverse become logically indefensible and pragmatically impossible. Without such commitments, all that is left is the amoral social Darwinism on which imperialism, colonialism, and cultural genocide are premised.

What the authors cited above are all calling for, each in their own ways, is a world in which Western modernity (or any other hegemonic system) is no longer falsely projected as the universal standard of morality, culture, and knowledge. Hegemonic projections of this kind invoke a spurious universalism as a mechanism of epistemic domination and cultural erasure. What is needed, instead, is the recognition that reality is infinitely complex, that diverse epistemological and cultural traditions can illuminate and value different aspects of reality, and that diverse peoples can thereby construct co-existing and complementary social realities that enrich humanity as a whole.²¹

This kind of pluriversality invites dialog across cultures without privileging any one culture. It recognizes the situated and contextual nature of many valuable forms of knowledge. It is not a call for cultural antagonism or isolationism, but for relationality and mutual appreciation. It invites curiosity and intercultural translation. And it

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, rev. edn. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016); Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Development of an Autonomous Social Science Tradition in Asia: Problems and Prospects," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, 1 (2002); Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha, *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon* (London: Springer, 2017); Alberto Guerreiro Ramos, *A Redução Sociológica [Sociological Reduction]*, 2nd edn. (Rio de Janeiro: ISEB [Advanced Institute of Brazilian Studies], 1965).

21 For a deeper exploration of this theme, see Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020).

beckons us to recognize all peoples as full partners in the community of nations.

In short, arguments for cultural and epistemological pluralism are arguments for the joint discovery of a universal moral framework capable of valuing, fostering, and protecting diversity as a source of global human flourishing. Such arguments are premised on the valuable contributions that the diverse peoples of an authentic pluriverse will make to the betterment of humanity. Such arguments orient toward the horizon of contributive justice. This horizon is not a false projection of the West. On the contrary, it is a radical departure from Western delusions of cultural and epistemological superiority.

At the same time, such arguments need not romanticize any cultures — past or present. Nor do they imply rigid notions of cultural preservationism. All cultures evolve in dynamic ways. All cultures have elements worth preserving and building on. But all cultures also have elements worth abandoning in the pursuit of social justice and other aspirations. Should we condone female genital mutilation in the name of cultural diversity? Should we condone the exclusion of women from educational opportunities and from participation in public life? Should we condone pedophilia? Should we bring back the tortuous practice of female foot binding? Cannibalism? Slavery?

Clearly, a cultural pluriverse cannot be premised on extreme moral relativism. What is important, in this regard, is that the people of a given culture are the primary protagonists in the evolution of their own culture. The global community of nations may also have a humanitarian responsibility to protect vulnerable segments of a population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.²² But this latter responsibility is not incompatible with a morally coherent cultural pluriverse. Indeed, such protections would be the hallmark of a global order characterized by cultural autonomy, self-determination, and pluriversality.

22 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect: The Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: IDRC Books, 2002); Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009); Alex Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect* (New York: Polity, 2009); Ramesh Thakur, *Reviewing the Responsibility to Protect: Origins, Implementation and Controversies* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Skepticism Regarding Social Body Metaphors

Finally, skeptics may also question the social body metaphor we employ in our conception of contributive justice. In Chapter 3, we conceptualize contributive justice as a set of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives. Skepticism may arise, in this regard, because social body metaphors can also be invoked for oppressive purposes.

In premodern societies, organic body metaphors and related expressions of oneness were often crudely invoked to justify oppressive social hierarchies or caste systems. Such metaphors implied that different categories of people had different moral worth and occupy different social strata. As a consequence, different social groups were held to different standards of justice, and oppressed groups were often dissuaded from struggling for social change under the pretext of preserving social harmony.²³

Thankfully, in the modern era, such views have been widely recognized as anachronistic and oppressive. Nonetheless, crude social body metaphors continued to be invoked in the early twentieth century by functionalist social theorists who were indifferent to structural injustices, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this book. Crude social body metaphors were also invoked by Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, to justify their repressive political programs — and they continue to be invoked by ethno-nationalists seeking to arouse xenophobic hostility by depicting “the other” as a pathogen or impurity within the social body.²⁴

23 A. D. Harvey, *Body Politic: Political Metaphor and Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Bertrand De Jouvenel, *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth*, trans. J. F. Huntington (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1993); David Hale, *The Body Politic: A Political Metaphor in Renaissance English Literature* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); David Johnston, *A Brief History of Justice* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

24 Laura Nader, “Harmony Models and the Construction of Law,” in *Conflict Resolution: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Avruch, Peter Black, and Joseph Scimecca (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Richard Koenigsberg, *Hitler's Ideology: A Study in Psychoanalytic Sociology* (New York: Library of Social Science, 1975); Erik Van Ree, “Stalin's Organic Theory of the Party,” *The Russian Review* 52 (1993); Gerald O'Brien, “Social Justice Implications of the Organism Metaphor,” *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 37, no. 1 (2010); Lise Noel, *Intolerance: A General*

As an antidote to oppressive uses of the social body metaphor, Western liberalism prescribes free and self-interested competition as the normative model for human behavior. According to this logic, a free society is an arena in which individuals and groups compete for scarce resources and opportunities, and social mobility is possible. The invisible hand of the market, and corresponding mechanisms in the political sphere, are entrusted to harness self-interested motivations in ways that allegedly maximize the common good. Core social institutions and practices are thus structured as contests that allegedly reward truth, excellence, innovation, efficiency, and productivity. Such contests produce winners and losers but, in the long run, surviving populations are allegedly better off. Such are the ideas that undergird modern capitalism, partisan democracy, the legal adversary system, and many other modern institutions and practices. But this culture of contest has proven to be oppressive in other ways, which we examine in Chapter 7 of this book.²⁵

In contrast to oppressive systems justified by organic body metaphors, the oppressive aspects of the prevailing culture of contest are often accepted as the lesser of two evils. We believe this presents a false choice. It conceals the possibility of understanding our organic interdependence within a morally coherent social body frame that views oneness and social justice as reciprocal principles. Organic body metaphors are not inherently oppressive. They become oppressive when they are invoked to disguise those base impulses toward egoism and othering we have examined at various points in this book. In other words, the principle of oneness becomes oppressive when it is uncoupled from the principle of contributive justice. In this regard, social oneness and social justice have to be recognized as reciprocal and mutually constitutive principles upon which a new social reality can be constructed. Some people may doubt this is possible. Ultimately, the only way to find out is to commit to these foundational principles and see what can be built on this foundation — a theme we examined in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.

Survey, trans. Arnold Bennett (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

25 These oppressive tendencies have been examined in even more depth in Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004).

Appendix B

Throughout this book we have tried to focus on the richest insights and highest aspirations of the movements and protagonists we have engaged. We believe that the ends of contributive justice and the means of radical constructive agency invite us to recognize and build on strengths rather than dwell on criticisms. Nevertheless, we recognize that criticism is a primary tool of many social theorists and commentators.

The discussion in Chapter 8 alludes to various criticisms of the Bahá'í Faith that are sometimes framed in terms of social justice. We chose not to disrupt the arc of that chapter by engaging those criticisms then. Instead, we offer this Appendix to consider those criticisms.

The most common of these derive from the Western liberal tendency to elevate many individual rights and freedoms above most communal values and norms. Some criticisms also derive from Western liberal notions regarding how the equality of women and men should look in practice. And beyond the Western liberal tradition, those who advocate a cultural pluriverse have also raised questions about the apparent tension between universality and diversity in the Bahá'í framework. All of these issues are considered in the discussion that follows. The purpose of this discussion is not to directly engage all of the relevant social justice scholarship. Such an endeavor is beyond the scope of what can reasonably be accomplished in this Appendix. Rather, the purpose is to offer our personal understanding of how such criticisms might be addressed from within the Bahá'í framework.

The Bahá'í community is constituted around a covenantal relationship, established in writing by Bahá'u'lláh, that clarifies where legitimate authority resides for guiding the affairs of the Bahá'í community after his passing in 1892.¹ This authority resided initially in

1 Shahin Vafai, "Overview: The Central Figures, the Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith,

his eldest son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who accompanied him through forty years of imprisonment and exile, and remained a prisoner of the Ottoman empire for another twenty years after Bahá’u’lláh’s death. After ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing in 1921, authority resided in Shoghi Effendi, who was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s eldest grandson and who had been nurtured by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to assume this role. Shoghi Effendi passed away in 1957. By 1963, the Bahá’í community had developed the global capacity to elect the Universal House of Justice according to provisions laid out in the covenant. The Universal House of Justice, which is elected every five years, now serves as the permanent governing authority of the Bahá’í community.

This covenantal arrangement has prevented the Bahá’í movement from fracturing and has ensured the integrity of its commitments over time. Acceptance of this covenant is a supremely voluntary act that defines what it means to be a Bahá’í. Anyone is free to depart from the covenant if they decide they no longer want to live by its provisions and no longer want to participate in the affairs of the community. Those who profess adherence to the covenant, but who seek to subvert or undermine its authority can, and have been, expelled from the Bahá’í community.²

Some Western liberal critics who elevate individual rights and freedoms above communal responsibilities find this difficult to accept. As a political philosophy, Western liberalism focuses almost entirely on the relationship between the individual and the state, and it attempts to organize this relationship through a rights-based social contract. But Western liberalism tends to obscure the role of communities in a functioning social order, and it fails to address the complex relationships that bind communities, states, and individuals together. Such relationships require not only a rights-based social contract, but also a responsibility-based covenant.³

and the Covenant,” in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

2 Wendy Heller, “The Covenant and Covenant-Breaking,” in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

3 For insightful discussions of this theme, see Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economies, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016); Wendy M. Heller, “Covenant and the Foundations of Civil Society,” *The Bahá’í World, 1995–96: An International Record* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Center, 1997, 1997).

In this regard, it is important to recognize that Western liberalism does not represent “the end of history” as some commentators prematurely asserted at the end of the cold war.⁴ Rather, it is a culturally and historically specific political philosophy that is not without internal flaws and contradictions. Those internal problems have given rise to what a growing number of contemporary commentators are calling the “crisis of liberalism.”⁵ Therefore, Western liberalism may not be the ultimate standard by which to judge a global movement that seeks to overcome the flaws and contradictions of Western liberalism. Primary Bahá’í texts acknowledge the many remarkable historical accomplishments of Western liberalism, and many of its elements are consistent with the Bahá’í teachings.⁶ But the Bahá’í Faith offers an alternative overarching framework.

Another criticism that can arise from advocates of Western liberalism pertains to Bahá’í views on human sexuality. It is increasingly common, within Western societies, to place human sexuality at the core of individual identity, and to advocate maximal rights and freedoms regarding sexual behavior and expression. The only constraints now placed on such rights and freedoms tend to be the requirement of mutual consent and the protection of minors. Within this liberal framework, moral codes that are intended to moderate sexual expression tend to be viewed as oppressive, even when they are voluntarily adopted and enacted only through self-discipline.⁷ Of course, in some cultural and historical contexts, extreme sexual norms and behaviors have been oppressive, and some forms of self-discipline can also reflect

4 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1993).

5 Vukan Marković, “Awaiting the Demise of the Liberal Order: Historicising the Crisis of Liberalism,” *Philosophy and Society* 34, no. 3 (2023); Fred Siegel and Joel Kotkin, *The Crisis of Liberalism: Prelude to Trump* (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2020); Jacques Rupnik, “The Crisis of Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018); Pierre Manent, “The Crisis of Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 1 (2014).

6 See, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, IL: US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1957); Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: To the Followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the United States of America* (29 December 1988) (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988).

7 See, for example, highly influential works such as Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Michel Foucault, “Disciplinary Power and Subjection,” in *Power*, ed. Steven Lukes (New York: New York University Press, 1986).

internalized forms of oppression. The relevant question, in this regard, is what constitutes oppressive norms and behaviors, and upon what basis we understand this.

In this regard, the Bahá'í framework offers an alternative to the prevailing Western liberal framework.⁸ According to the Bahá'í framework, the core of an individual's identity is the spiritual nature they share with all other humans, with the rational soul at its center. The soul begins its development on this earthly plane in association with the body but continues its development after the dissolution of the body. This eternal soul has no sex or gender, even though our experience on this earthly plane is deeply shaped by our biological sex and is impacted by prevailing gender norms. While on this earth, the soul has a two-fold moral purpose, which is to develop its latent capacities in order to contribute to the betterment of the human condition. Part of this development entails learning how to moderate various instincts inherited from humanity's long evolutionary struggle to survive. Such instincts include egoism and othering, as previously discussed. Such instincts also include tendencies to elevate sexual gratification above other values that promote human flourishing. For Bahá'ís, learning to moderate such instincts is an important aspect of our social and spiritual development.

Bahá'ís affirm that consenting sexual pleasure within a marriage is legitimate and desirable. Within the Bahá'í community, marriage is an arrangement entered into voluntarily by a woman and man.⁹ Outside of this arrangement, Bahá'ís are exhorted to refrain from sexual intimacy with others.¹⁰ This aspect of the Bahá'í teachings will undoubtedly be difficult for many people to accept, but Bahá'ís accept this as an article of faith. Moreover, this code of conduct is not policed within the Bahá'í community. Rather, it is understood as a moral responsibility that

8 Universal House of Justice, *To a National Spiritual Assembly* (23 April 2013); Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of Iran* (2 March 2013), <https://www.bahai.org/r/386360789>. For a broader discussion of basic Bahá'í views on human nature, see beliefs, refer to Ian Kluge, "The Physical and Spiritual Dimensions of Human Nature," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

9 Wendi Momen, "Marriage and Family Life," in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

10 For a thoughtful examination of this theme, see Bahá'ís of the United States, *The Bahá'í Teachings and Homosexuality*. <https://www.bahai.us/bahai-teachings-homosexuality>

individuals voluntarily strive to fulfil, motivated by an understanding of the spiritual dimension of human nature, their two-fold moral purpose, and their commitment to the covenant.¹¹ Furthermore, Bahá'ís uphold freedom of conscience for all, and advocate for the fundamental human rights of all, regardless of their sexual orientation.¹² In this regard, the Bahá'í teachings explicitly prohibit Bahá'ís from seeking to impose their standards on others through public policies or any other measures.¹³ This includes a requirement to remain neutral on public policies related to sexual norms, same-sex marriage, and related issues.¹⁴

On a related note, Bahá'ís do not question scientific findings regarding a biological basis for some homosexual impulses. The question, for Bahá'ís, is not whether such impulses are natural. The question is whether some natural sexual impulses might be voluntarily subordinated to other values associated with human flourishing.¹⁵ Indeed, there are many Bahá'ís who experience same-sex attraction, who voluntarily strive to adopt this standard, and whose presence and contributions within the movement are valued. Bahá'ís also value the contributions of all people to the betterment of humanity, including those from the wider societies Bahá'ís live in who choose to act on homosexual impulses. Contributive justice demands no less. The record of the Bahá'í community clearly demonstrates this, even as it demonstrates the fact that Bahá'ís do not seek to impose their voluntarily chosen personal commitments on others.¹⁶ Furthermore, anyone who enters the Bahá'í community's voluntary commitments is free, at any time, to withdraw from the community and its commitments — without diminishing the esteem Bahá'ís are called by their own teachings to continue showing them. In other words, every soul has to make choices regarding their sexual activity, and all such choices rest on stated or unstated assumptions about human nature, about the nature and purpose of

11 Universal House of Justice, *To a National Spiritual Assembly* (23 April 2013).

12 Universal House of Justice, *Letter to an Individual* (27 October 2010).

13 Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of Iran* (2 March 2013).

14 Universal House of Justice, *Letter to an Individual* (27 October 2010).

15 Bahá'ís of the United States, *The Bahá'í Teachings and Homosexuality*.

16 In our many decades of experience as Bahá'ís — across multiple continents and in numerous administrative roles — we have never seen or heard of a single incident to the contrary. Neither have we seen any such incidents cited in any criticisms leveled against Bahá'ís. Rather, such criticisms are offered in the abstract and are not based on evidence of discrimination.

sexual activity, about the nature and purpose of marriage and other social relationships, and so forth. In this regard, the Bahá'í community is testing the long-term fruitfulness of a shared set of assumptions. But the Bahá'í teachings preclude the community from imposing those assumptions on anyone, even as they exhort individual Bahá'ís not to judge those who operate from different assumptions. On the contrary, Bahá'ís seek constructive and mutually appreciative relationships with people from all backgrounds and beliefs.

Of course, this understanding and approach may not satisfy critics who believe the Bahá'í community's assumptions are intrinsically unjust and oppressive, and who believe that their own contrasting assumptions are the morally correct or socially just way to think. But meaningful commitments to freedom of conscience and cultural diversity should enable contrasting beliefs of this kind to respectfully co-exist as long as neither becomes the cause of animosity or harm to others.

Bahá'ís also do not question scientific findings that gender dysphoria can have a biological basis. They consider questions related to gender transition as a medical matter, not a theological or moral one. Answers to these questions are to be determined by individuals in consultation with family, community, medical experts, and the best available science.¹⁷ Thus, there are transgender Bahá'ís whose presence and contributions within the movement are also valued, even as Bahá'ís value the contributions of transgender individuals from the wider societies Bahá'ís inhabit. Again, contributive justice demands no less.

Another critique that is sometimes directed at the Bahá'í community pertains to elected membership on the Universal House of Justice. According to the provisions of the covenant, this is the only institution in the Bahá'í world whose membership is confined to men. Some people find this aspect of the Bahá'í teachings difficult to accept. The Bahá'í teachings explain that the reason for this will become clear in time as humanity's understanding evolves, and in the meantime Bahá'ís accept this as an article of faith.¹⁸ Granted, this will not convince some critics of the Bahá'í Faith who argue that any restriction of membership on the

17 Universal House of Justice, *Selected Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice* (4 February 2021), https://bahai-library.com/compilation_uhj_transsexuality

18 For an in-depth discussion of this theme, see Khan and Khan, *Advancement of Women*.

Universal House of Justice violates the principle of equality. In response, we offer a few additional points for readers to consider.

Western liberal ideas regarding the equality of women and men are not the only way to understand this equality. The Bahá'í framework offers an alternative understanding.¹⁹ Equality is an explicit Bahá'í teaching that is deeply woven into the fabric of the community, but Bahá'ís do not understand equality as sameness. Rather, they accept that human diversity has no bearing on the equal moral worth of every soul, on the capacity of every soul to contribute to the betterment of humanity, on the necessity of fostering conditions in which all such capacities can be cultivated, and on the necessity of women's equal participation in the life of society. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "the world of humanity possesses two wings: man and woman. If one wing remains incapable and defective, it will restrict the power of the other, and full flight will be impossible. Therefore, the completeness and perfection of the human world are dependent upon the equal development of these two wings."²⁰ Thus equality need not be understood as sameness.

Furthermore, elected service on Bahá'í institutions cannot be sought and it does not confer any individual power or privileges within the community. On the contrary, it is an unsolicited call to service and sacrifice, which are carried out under conditions of relative anonymity. The Bahá'í teachings also emphatically assert that decision making on all elected institutions, including the Universal House of Justice, must explicitly account for the principle of the equality of women and men. In support of this, Bahá'í training institutes have been learning how to raise up generations of men who can become full partners with women in efforts to root out patriarchal oppression and promote the advancement of women.

19 For analyses of the Bahá'í teachings on the equality of women and men, how this translates into the Bahá'í framework for action, and the progress Bahá'ís have been making on this front, see Anne Pearson, "The Equality of the Sexes," in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV, 2006–2021*, ed. Naisohn Arfai and Robert Weinberg (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center Publications, 2024); Ann Boyles, "Women and Social Progress: Building Communities Based on Dynamic Partnership," in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XXXV, 2006–2021*, ed. Naisohn Arfai and Robert Weinberg (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center Publications, 2024); Janet Khan and Peter Khan, *Advancement of Women: A Bahá'í Perspective* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2003).

20 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, trans. Howard MacNutt, 2nd edn. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 318.

These commitments are perhaps most clearly expressed in the explicit Bahá'í teaching that if a family or community cannot afford to educate all of its children, it should prioritize the education of girls.²¹ Bahá'ís have been committed to this principle since the early days of the Faith and have been publicly advocating it as a priority for the field of international development since the inception of that field.²² In recent decades, that field has begun to recognize that the education of girls is among the most impactful investments that can be made in the development of any population.²³

One can see the impact of this commitment in the development of the earliest Bahá'í community, in Iran. Iranian culture has deeply entrenched patterns of patriarchy that, even today, continue to deny women many of the freedoms, rights, and opportunities available to men. Bahá'ís were the first in modern Iran to reject the veiling of women, to declare the full equality of women and men, to advocate for the education of girls and women, and to begin translating these principles into practice in every arena of family and community life. Among other things, Bahá'ís were at the forefront of modern efforts to establish schools for girls in Iran.²⁴ These schools were open not only to Bahá'í children but to children from all faiths and backgrounds.

21 For an examination of these teachings, see Khan and Khan, *Advancement of Women*.

22 See, for example, the Bahá'í International Community, *Elimination of Discrimination Against Women - A Statement to the 25th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women* (15 January 1974), <https://www.bic.org/statements/elimination-discrimination-against-women>. This is only one early example of hundreds of statements made by the Bahá'í International Community in national and international forums concerned with education, development, and the status of women. For a full collection of such statements made in United Nations forums, see the Bahá'í International Community's statement library at <https://www.bic.org>

23 Quentin Wodon et al., *Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls* (Children's Investment Fund Foundation, Global Partnership for Education, Malala Fund, and the World Bank Group, July 2018); Barbara Herz and Gene Sperling, *What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004).

24 Moojan Momen, "Bahá'í Schools in Iran," in *The Bahá'ís of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel (Oxford: Routledge, 2007); Soli Shahvar, *The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'ís and Modern Education in Iran, 1899–1934* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009); Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam, "Educating Girls in Early Twentieth-Century Iran: A Study of a Bahá'í School," *Journal of Religious History* 36, no. 4 (2012); Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam, "Promoting the Advancement of Women: Bahá'í Schools for Girls in Iran, 1909–35," *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2013).

Within the Iranian Bahá'í community, the advancement of women was especially pronounced. Over the span of a few generations, despite the patriarchal norms of the wider society that Bahá'ís were born into, women were integrated with men in all Bahá'í community functions, including service on elected Bahá'í institutions and committees.²⁵ In the process, Bahá'í women developed valuable capabilities that Iranian culture had denied them, along with an invaluable sense of dignity and self-worth. One illustration of this is the fact that, by 1974, Iranian Bahá'í women under the age of forty had achieved 100% literacy, in comparison to the national average of only 15%.²⁶

Similar patterns of female empowerment have been playing out in Bahá'í communities around the world, despite the patriarchal cultures many such communities spring from. One global indicator of this is the way Bahá'í training institutes have attracted the active participation and leadership of women.²⁷ Globally, women comprise roughly 50% of those who have completed the basic sequence of training institute courses, and roughly 60% of those who have gone on to complete the advanced sequence. In turn, women are becoming leading protagonists in the framework for action fostered by those training institutes. For instance, in countries where basic educational infrastructure is lacking, training institutes have been developing the capacity for local communities to build their own community schools, often in underserved rural areas, by raising up local human resources. Hundreds of these schools now exist across many countries. One of these countries is the Central African Republic where, in 2014, only 20% of primary teachers in the national educational system were women, yet in schools raised up by training institutes, 55 to 60% of the teachers are women. This is only one illustration of the way women are being empowered within this movement. Around the world, the level of initiative women are taking within the movement's framework for action is comparable. Bahá'ís are also leading innovative efforts to engage underserved women from all backgrounds in empowering forms

25 Ann Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership: One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Advancement of Women," in *The Bahá'í World: 1993-1994* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1994).

26 Boyles, "Full Partnership."

27 The data that follows comes from Boyles, "Women and Social Progress: Building Communities Based on Dynamic Partnership."

of education in many parts of the world.²⁸

The empowerment of women can also be seen in the Bahá'í system of governance.²⁹ This system is composed of both elected and appointed arms. In 2024, roughly 42% of individuals elected to serve on National Spiritual Assemblies around the world were women. Of those elected to serve as the principal executive officer on these National Assemblies, 53% were women. Membership of women on Regional Bahá'í Councils was about 46%. And the data indicates that all of these figures have been steadily moving toward parity in recent years.

Consider how this compares to women's elected representation on institutions in Western liberal societies, which are presumably the most progressive of all societies in terms of the inclusion of women in elected offices. Only 28% of lawmakers in the US Congress are women, and fewer than 34% of parliamentarians across the European Union are women.³⁰ Bahá'ís have accomplished much higher levels of inclusion across hundreds of National Assemblies and Regional Councils, many of which are in societies with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that Bahá'ís have had to overcome.

Within the appointed institutions of the Bahá'í administrative system, the percentage of women is even higher. Of the nine members that currently comprise the International Teaching Centre, five are women. Of the ninety members comprising the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 47% are women. And of the 1,059 members comprising the Auxiliary Boards around the world, 52% are women.

In these and many other ways, the empirical evidence demonstrates that Bahá'ís are deeply committed to the equality of women and men. Stated another way, the examples discussed above can be understood as some of the earliest fruits of the episteme Bahá'ís are cultivating. In

28 See, for example, Erin Murphy-Graham, *Opening Minds, Improving Lives: Education and Women's Empowerment in Honduras* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012).

29 Again, the data that follows comes from Boyles, "Women and Social Progress: Building Communities Based on Dynamic Partnership."

30 Pew Research Center, *Women Account for 28% of Lawmakers in the 119th Congress – Unchanged from the Last Congress* (21 February 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/02/21/women-account-for-28-of-lawmakers-in-the-119th-congress-unchanged-from-the-last-congress/>; Eurostat, "One-third of Parliamentarians Across the EU are Women," (5 March 2026), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20260305-1>

light of this provisional evidence, assertions that the Bahá'í community oppresses women are difficult to support.

Furthermore, when assessing these early fruits, it may help to consider the cultural contexts in which this work has advanced. On one hand, patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched and explicitly defended in many traditional societies around the world. Such norms often exclude girls and women from accessing education and other opportunities outside the home. They can result in the silencing and forced veiling of women in public. And they can sanction violence against women in both the private and public spheres. On the other hand, the capitalist economies that have arisen within the Western liberal episteme tend to demean, objectify, and pornographize girls and women throughout the public sphere in order to exploit sexual impulses for commercial profit. This hyper-sexualization of the Western public sphere — from public spaces to traditional media to the internet to social media and even artificial intelligence applications — now reaches deeply into the lives of children and adolescents. It is shaping their perceptions of what it means to be human, including their sense of purpose in life; it is diverting their time and energy from essential processes of physical, social, intellectual, and moral development; it is fostering distorted understandings of what constitutes healthy sexual intimacy that they can carry into adulthood; and, not surprisingly, the most pernicious impacts of these trends tend to be born disproportionately by girls and women.³¹ In contrast to these traditional and modern social realities, the emergent Bahá'í episteme appears to be fostering new attitudes and habits, new patterns of community life, and new institutional structures that liberate and empower girls and women (as well as boys and men).

Finally, some critics assert that the Bahá'í community's commitment to a framework of universal normative principles is incompatible with its commitment to cultural diversity. However, as noted in Chapter 3, all arguments for cultural diversity — including arguments for a pluriverse

31 Eileen L. Zurbriggen et al., *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007); Global Education Monitoring Report Team, *Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender report - Technology on Her Terms* (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2024); Meyran Boniel-Nissim et al., *A Focus on Adolescent Social Media Use and Gaming in Europe, Central Asia and Canada: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children, International Report from the 2021/2022 Survey* (Copenhagen: World Health Organization, 2024).

— are implicitly or explicitly premised on universal normative commitments to diversity, social justice, the equal moral worth of all peoples, the right to cultural self-determination, and so forth. The Bahá'í framework is also premised on such commitments.

Bahá'ís understand these and other related commitments not merely as subjective preferences or cultural constructs, but as spiritual principles or foundational normative truths that bear on human flourishing. Though the human mind cannot grasp the essence of such principles, we can observe the effects of observing or ignoring them in human affairs.³²

Consider, in this regard, an analogy from the laws of physics alluded to earlier in this book. We cannot directly observe gravity. Nor can any physicist explain what the invisible force of gravity is, in its essence. But we are confident it exists because we can measure and predict its effects — and we ignore gravity at our peril. The same is arguably true for a principle like justice. We cannot directly observe it. Nor can we explain its essence. But we can predict the effects of upholding or ignoring this principle in human affairs. Upholding it leads to human flourishing. Ignoring it leads to human suffering, social strife, movements for social change, and so forth.

As with the laws that govern the physical universe, the normative truths that govern human existence can be investigated, tested, and applied to the betterment of humanity. And, just as the laws of physics can be applied in the development of myriad scientific and technological innovations, normative truths can be applied in the development of myriad social or cultural constructs. Thus, from a limited set of foundational normative principles, an infinite range of creative cultural expressions become possible.

The cultural diversity and cultural self-determination Bahá'ís envision is of this nature. On what other basis is a cultural pluriverse possible? In the absence of some foundationally shared normative commitments — including commitments to cultural diversity and cultural autonomy — it would be impossible to create the conditions needed to foster and protect such diversity and autonomy. In the absence of such principles, how can humanity ever overcome the exercise of imperialist ambitions, the imposition of hegemonic social orders, the social Darwinism associated with such tendencies, in the pursuit of social justice?

32 Michael Karlberg, *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020).

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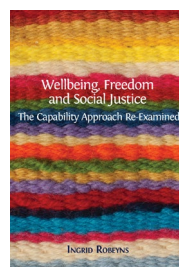
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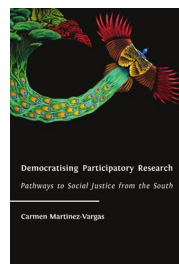
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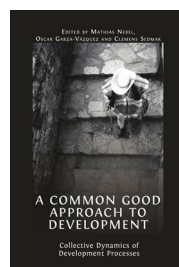


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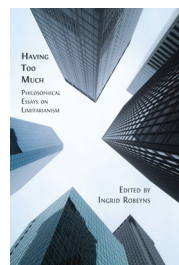


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RETHINKING SOCIAL JUSTICE

THEORY AND ACTION IN AN AGE OF TRANSITION

MICHAEL KARLBERG AND DERIK SMITH

Rethinking Social Justice reflects years of trying to learn from social movements, contemporary and historical. As a survey, it is a tour de force. Beyond this delineation, Karlberg and Smith suggest a new mode of constructive practice, which promises to hold movements together precisely at the moment of contention when they (we) tend to fragment. Their suggestion is a perhaps necessary invitation, and read closely it is a humble provocation, for today's activists. This book will be fruitfully read by scholars, activists, faith groups, and community members seeking to bridge divides in knowledge production and—if we can learn from each other—to work together more coherently.

Benjamin P. Davis, author of *Another Humanity: Decolonial Ethics from Du Bois to Arendt*

This book offers a compelling and original rethinking of social justice at a moment of global uncertainty and transformation. Tracing the emergence and evolution of modern social justice discourse, it addresses two fundamental questions: what ends should we aspire toward, and what means are most effective in pursuing them? Moving beyond familiar critiques of injustice, the authors identify a shared, though often implicit, horizon that diverse traditions of thought all orient toward: *contributive justice*. This positive vision of social justice centers on the creation of social conditions that enable every individual and group to develop their capacities to contribute meaningfully to collective flourishing.

Drawing on a wide range of philosophical, historical, and empirical sources, the book critically examines the strategies that have shaped social justice movements. It argues that, in the current transitional period, contentious and oppositional approaches are reaching a point of diminishing returns. In their place, the authors propose *radical constructive agency*: purposeful, collective efforts to build new social forms and institutions capable of supplanting anachronistic and unjust ones.

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